

Arizona Water Security Plan

Arizona has reached a crossroads.

Longstanding and languishing water issues have come to a head. Key expiration and renewal dates for significant regional water management policies and agreements are imminent. Meanwhile, climate change and aridification are fundamentally changing life-supporting ecosystems across the Southwest. We must acknowledge these challenges as the starting point for water management discussions and recognize that the decisions made on water in the next decade are imperative for the future of the state. We must choose to collectively pursue actions that ensure water security for all.

Why We Need the Arizona Water Security Plan

Arizona has historically taken important steps to secure water supplies in parts of the state, with particular success for urban areas that depend on Colorado River water. Arizona has cultivated a reputation characterized by successful water management by safeguarding its Colorado River allocation and urban groundwater supplies through historic efforts such as passage of the 1980 Groundwater Management Act and the more recent completion of the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan (DCP).

And yet, the Colorado River and its tributaries—which support 40 million people, a \$1.4 trillion economy, more than five million acres of farm and ranch land, and thousands of species of wildlife—are shrinking due to climate change and overuse. Threats to water supplies are imminent and are increasing over time. As availability of Colorado River water decreases, our reliance on in-state surface water and groundwater will intensify—and therefore we must strengthen and modernize our policies and structures in order to sustainably manage these resources. Rapidly declining water levels in Lakes Powell and Mead signal the arrival of climate change across the Southwest. A paradigm shift in Arizona’s water management policies and mindset is urgently needed to respond and keep up. It is critical that all water supplies in our portfolio across the state are well-managed to ensure their reliability and sustainability for generations to come.

Our communities, environment, health, and livelihoods depend on how we choose to respond in the next decade to sustainably manage our water supplies. It is now time to take actions that will ensure that every Arizonan, business, and community has access to reliable water supplies, regardless of location in the state.

In the coming years, we face key challenges that need to be addressed:

- The operating guidelines for the Colorado River expire in 2026 and need to be renegotiated among the Colorado River Basin States, the federal government, tribal nations, and Basin stakeholders to reduce the risk of catastrophic system failure.
- Key provisions of Arizona’s Groundwater Code, which has protected groundwater supplies in five Active Management Areas in the central and southern part of the state since 1980, need to be renewed and updated by 2025.
- In rural Arizona, the last area in the entire Colorado River Basin where groundwater pumping is still unlimited, wells are running dry, and rivers and streams across the state are experiencing reduced flows due to unrestricted groundwater withdrawals.
- The state’s decades-long adjudication process that is a prerequisite for water rights certainty languishes without sufficient resources; and
- Eleven of Arizona’s 22 sovereign Native American nations are still without a resolution and full state and federal recognition of their water rights. For some tribes, this is a barrier preventing access to water to meet basic needs.

To sustain flowing rivers and springs, prevent wells from drying up, conserve habitat for wildlife, and ensure the state of Arizona has a reliable water supply for all, a new era of water management and leadership is required.

Current and future decision makers in the state Legislature and in the governor’s office should prioritize an integrated, statewide set of generational reforms and smart investments in Arizona’s water future, which we are calling our *Arizona Water Security Plan*.



Sycamore Creek, Arizona. Photo: Justin Clifton

The foundation of this bold approach is to address six urgent and interrelated water issues.

ISSUE 1: ACKNOWLEDGE ACCELERATING CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS AND INCORPORATE URGENCY INTO OUR WATER PLANNING AND DECISION MAKING.

We should heed what Colorado River and water experts are telling us and plan for the river we are going to have, not the one we remember, or the one we wish for. Stakeholders need to solve this problem together and collectively decide how Arizona is going to live with less Colorado River water. This means acknowledging the reality of a drier future in how we model and estimate future water supplies. In addition, we must accelerate work with other states, tribes, the federal government, and Mexico in order to scale up durable and long-lasting conservation investments and renew the operating rules for the river to prevent Lakes Mead and Powell from falling to critically low elevations.

ISSUE 2: PROTECT GROUNDWATER FOR ALL ARIZONANS (INCLUDING OUTSIDE OF ACTIVE MANAGEMENT AREAS).

Right now, communities in rural Arizona have few tools to conserve and manage their groundwater resources, leading to the depletion of wells, community water supplies, and rivers and streams in parts of the state. The state should empower local communities to collectively plan at the groundwater basin level and protect their groundwater resources through a combination of options to be selected from at the local level—potentially including incentives (like funding for groundwater recharge or other water conservation projects) and sensible regulation to protect existing users (like protections to prevent negative impacts to existing wells).

ISSUE 3: RENEW THE GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT ACT AND UPDATE THE RULES FOR MANAGING GROUNDWATER WITHIN THE AMAS.

Key provisions in the Groundwater Management Act need to be renewed to continue to guide groundwater management in our most populous areas past the year 2025. Shortages and voluntary conservation of water in Lake Mead mean less Colorado River water coming into the AMAs, increasing the reliance on groundwater. In order to strengthen the state's commitment to groundwater sustainability, we must adapt how we currently govern groundwater within Active Management Areas to account for less Colorado River water coming into the state—and to address the existing shortfalls in our groundwater management.



Colorado River, Yuma, Arizona. Photo: Sinjin Eberle

ISSUE 4: CONTINUE TO SUPPORT TRIBES IN RESOLVING TRIBAL WATER ISSUES.

We need leadership on this issue from state and federal decision makers that includes rapid allocation of federal infrastructure dollars to improve access to clean and reliable drinking water on tribal lands, as well as other investments that advance livelihood security consistent with tribal self-determination in the use and conservation of their water. We must support tribes to make full use of their water rights and resources to meet tribal needs and goals. State and federal water leaders must also work with tribes to complete equitable water rights settlements for those tribes who want them—or help find other resolutions to fully recognize and fulfill tribes’ unique water rights that for decades have existed only “on paper.”

ISSUE 5: ACCELERATE THE RESOLUTION OF LONG-STANDING LEGAL UNCERTAINTIES OVER WATER RIGHTS BY DEDICATING MORE FUNDING TO THIS EFFORT.

Currently, there is too much uncertainty within the state about who can use how much water in many of the state’s watersheds, making it difficult for water users and managers to plan for the future. We need to complete the long-running lawsuits known as the General Stream Adjudications in order to have more certainty and foster innovation, flexibility, and resilience for our water supplies. Innovation looks like temporary and longer-term agricultural conservation and crop-shifting programs; increased flexibility for changing, trading, and offsetting water uses among willing buyers and sellers, with guardrails to ensure achievement of community and sustainability goals; boosting in-stream flows to support wildlife and groundwater; and providing more certainty so that tribes, farmers, landowners, municipalities, and others can plan for their water future.

ISSUE 6: INVEST IN WATER CONSERVATION PROJECTS AND IN THE AGENCIES THAT PROMOTE THE SUSTAINABILITY AND QUALITY OF OUR WATER SUPPLIES.

We are in a moment of massive public interest and investment in water projects and water policy. To adapt to climate change and capitalize on the public investment opportunities, we must develop an “all-of-the-above” statewide supply and demand strategy that includes aggressive conservation, recycling and reuse, multi-benefit stormwater and groundwater recharge, forest restoration to improve watershed health, and (realistic) augmentation projects. The Arizona Department of Water Resources and the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality must be adequately funded so they can collect and make data available on water quantity and quality, analyze changes over time, implement conservation programs, enforce water quality standards to protect waterways, support water sustainability projects, and provide leadership to protect water supplies and support water users across the state.