



COLORADO RIVER DISTRICT
PROTECTING WESTERN COLORADO WATER SINCE 1937

May 18, 2021

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources
Republican Office
U.S. House of Representatives
1329 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Virtual Forum on the Catastrophic Drought Situation Across the American West

Dear Ranking Member Westerman and Natural Resources Committee Republicans:

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's forum and thank you for your continued attention to this important issue.

The Colorado River is arguably the single most important natural resource to the State of Colorado and the 40 million people throughout the American Southwest that rely on its waters. The Colorado River powers our economies. It provides food and fiber to the nation and the world. And its fate will determine our own.

For more than 80 years, the Colorado River District has worked to protect the water interests of western Colorado. We were created by the Colorado General Assembly in 1937 to serve as the principal water policy and planning agency for the water resources of the Colorado River system on Colorado's western slope.

We manage, conserve, develop and protect West Slope water on behalf of the State of Colorado and the citizens in the 15 Colorado counties that form the headwaters of the Yampa, White, Colorado and Gunnison Rivers. From the Continental Divide to the Utah border, the River District covers approximately 29,000 square miles – nearly one-third of Colorado's total landmass. Approximately 65% of the Colorado River's natural flow originates within the District's boundaries.

The economy of the Colorado River District is as diverse as its topography. Its headwaters regions support world-class ski resorts with both winter and summer attractions. Rivers, reservoirs and natural lakes support fishing, rafting, kayaking and boating activities throughout the District. Mining and energy development are also important economic drivers for many communities within the River District.

Agriculture has historically been, and remains, the River District's largest user of Colorado River water. Approximately 500,000 acres of land in the District are irrigated through several hundred individual ditch and reservoir companies, irrigation districts, water users' associations and water conservancy districts.

Today, the District continues its work to safeguard the Western Slope's water supplies for agricultural, municipal, industrial, recreational, and environmental uses. But our job is getting more difficult with every passing year.

Colorado's Western Slope and the entire Colorado River Basin continue to suffer from the effects of multi-decadal drought and increasing temperatures. It is well documented that the West Slope is in the epicenter of a region that continues to experience a significantly above-average rise in temperature. Counties from Ouray to Mesa to Moffat have experienced a more than 4-degree Fahrenheit rise in average annual temperatures since 1895. This rise in temperatures reduces water supply, increases water consumption, and dries out soils, which in turn reduces overall snowpack and runoff in subsequent years. The impact of these hotter, drier temperatures on water supplies are real and meaningful. For every 1-degree Fahrenheit rise in temperature, we see streamflow reductions between 3% and 5% (see attached graphics).

Monthly precipitation of late has also continued to be below average in the Colorado River District territory. As of May 13, the snow water equivalent in our mountain snowpack was well below average across the Western Slope with the Colorado River mainstem at 79% of average, the Gunnison River basin at 54% and the Yampa & White River basins at 67%. Certain areas in the southwest corner of the state have less than 40% of the average snowpack.

These continued drought conditions have renewed fears across the region of another catastrophic wildfire season that could further damage critical watersheds, and negatively impact agricultural and municipal water supplies. Last summer, Colorado experienced the three largest wildfires in its recorded history — all in the same season. Watersheds and water infrastructure on both sides of the Continental Divide were seriously impacted by wildfire last summer, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in restoration and mitigation expenses in the Centennial State alone. Nationwide, it is estimated that wildfires in 2020 cost \$16.5 billion, and \$67.3 billion over the last five years (2016-2020).

In addition to the below-average seasonal snowpack, the temperature and precipitation model forecasts are predicting a hot and dry summer with above-average temperatures across most of the southwest. Forecasters also predict below-average precipitation, particularly in the Upper Colorado River Basin and most of the Colorado River Basin is currently in extreme or exceptional drought conditions.

Adding insult to injury, low soil moisture continues to adversely impact runoff from snowmelt. Models from the Colorado Basin River Forecast Center suggest the majority of the Upper Colorado River Basin has such low soil moisture that it will require up to 12 inches of water to reach saturation. This means that most of the snowpack is absorbing into the soils and not turning into runoff. Year after year, unusually dry soils from warmer than normal temperatures and a lack of

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moisture are absorbing more of the water that melts from our snowpack in the Rocky Mountains, resulting in less water making its way to our rivers for people and the natural environment.

Lastly, with the sizable reservoir drawdowns from last year's drought conditions, very few reservoirs are likely to fill in the upcoming water year. This soil moisture deficit presents an even greater challenge to refilling the Colorado River storage system, especially the lower, larger facilities, like Lakes Powell and Mead.

In conclusion, the hydrological conditions in the Colorado River Basin are reason for concern. Real and meaningful investments in land management and infrastructure are needed now if we are going to assist communities in the West adapt to a hotter, drier future. Yes, it is likely that the declining flows in the Colorado River system will bring significant changes to our communities and our local economies in the Colorado River Basin. But while change can be threatening, it also brings opportunity. We believe the best way to confront threats and create beneficial change is to do it together, regardless of political differences, because it's no less than our water supplies and our livelihoods that are at risk.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Zane Kessler', written over a horizontal line.

Zane Kessler
Director of Government Relations