

August 16, 2022

STATEMENT FROM COLORADO RIVER BOARD CHAIRMAN PETER NELSON

The Colorado River Basin is in the 23rd year of a historic drought. Both Lake Powell and Lake Mead – the two largest reservoirs in the United States – are at historically low levels with a combined storage of 27 percent of capacity. The sobering news that the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation delivered today during its release of the August 24 Month Study Report and the projections for 2023 reservoir operations comes as no surprise, and while California is disappointed that a consensus-based agreement among the Colorado River Basin States to conserve additional water supplies in 2023 is not ready to be announced today, California remains ready and willing to finalize an agreement with our partners across the Basin to protect the reservoir system we all rely upon.

California has demonstrated its commitment to water conservation time and again over the decades, but we also recognize that more must be done now as the System reaches critically low water supply levels. Over the past few years, despite its senior priority water rights, water users in California have been taking additional actions to conserve water and reduce the risks to the Basin’s reservoirs.

Since the establishment of the 2007 Interim Shortage Guidelines, California has added over 1.5 million acre-feet (MAF) and 20 feet of elevation of conserved water to Lake Mead, without which a formal shortage could have been declared as early as 2015. This was achieved through billions of dollars of investments in urban and agricultural conservation across Southern California, through programs that reach virtually every Colorado River water user in the state. California also agreed to participate in the 2019 Drought Contingency Plan, further bolstering storage in Lake Mead. These actions are on top of the 2003 Quantification Settlement Agreement, a groundbreaking program through which California permanently reduced its lawful water use by nearly 20%, from 5.2 MAF to 4.4 MAF, and demonstrated the feasibility of large-scale water use reductions in the Colorado River Basin.

Although the Basin States have not yet agreed on a consensus-based solution to address declining reservoir elevations, California will continue implementing additional conservation programs in 2023 that result in meaningful water contributions to the system. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California put an emergency water conservation declaration in place this past June, directing six million residents to limit outdoor watering to one day per week or stay within a limit of 55 gallons per person per day. To date, Metropolitan and its member agencies lead the nation in investments in water recycling, stormwater capture, and brackish groundwater and

seawater desalination. Through its fallowing program with Metropolitan and in partnership with entities across the Lower Basin, the Palo Verde Irrigation District began adding conserved water to Lake Mead in 2021 and will continue to do so through 2024. In addition to existing water efficiency and water recycling programs, the Coachella Valley Water District approved its first-ever agricultural water use reduction program in 2022 to conserve water this year and next. The Imperial Irrigation District currently conserves and transfers on average 500,000 acre-feet per year and has saved more than 7 MAF of water since 2003 as its conservation programs continue to ramp up. Through its rollout of a revised Equitable Distribution Plan, IID has also significantly reduced its demand in 2022.

California appreciates the engagement and initial commitments of our State and Federal partners to address the long-term sustainability of the Salton Sea given its linkage to the Colorado River System. We look forward to continuing these discussions and believe that developing solutions for Salton Sea management is a necessary step that will protect the health of disadvantaged communities and ecosystems and enable new opportunities for conservation in the Imperial and Coachella Valleys, contributing to Basin-wide sustainability. California also appreciates the significant contributions of our Congressional delegation and State officials in securing vital federal authorizations and fiscal resources that will enable both Colorado River Basin drought relief activities and Salton Sea management.

California believes that in the remaining months of 2022, all parties across the Basin must remain engaged with the goal of reaching agreement on substantial water use reductions. Given the monumental challenges before us, inactivity is not an option. California is committed to the process and ready to implement meaningful water use reductions alongside our partners on the river to prevent the reservoirs from falling to critical levels through 2026.

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