

December 4th, 2023

**Chair Chandler-Henry and Members of the Colorado River Drought Task Force:**

The undersigned conservation organizations would like to express our appreciation for your hard work over the past several months and offer some final thoughts before you vote on which recommendations to move forward to the Colorado legislature.

Early on in this process, we sent you a letter outlining the following principles we hoped you would take to heart in your deliberations:

- Transparency and inclusivity
- Being proactive
- Protecting the environment alongside our communities and economies
- Taking advantage of federal funding opportunities

With regard to transparency and inclusivity, we deeply appreciate the placement of working documents on the task force web page and the opportunity for the public to comment at task force meetings.

Action is clearly needed. Even in the wet year we just experienced in 2023, some Colorado water users experienced shortages, and it was difficult to hit Upper Colorado Endangered Fish Recovery Program targets. We feel that the following concepts you have discussed will help address these challenges and advance the principles of proactivity protecting the environment alongside communities and economies:

- Providing direction to **shepherd water in a way that benefits the environment** whenever possible would serve the principle of protecting the environment alongside our communities and economies. These environmental benefits would help compensate communities for costs that may be associated with water conservation and/ or reservoir releases.
- We strongly support the proposed measures that would increase opportunities for water rights owners to voluntarily help streams in trouble and address other problems related to drought. These measures include the proposed enhancements to the **In-stream Flow Program** and **water banking statute** and **additional flexibility in the use of stored water**. Such actions would help preserve Colorado values and quality of life when water supplies are limited. These are proactive measures that would enable our state to more nimbly respond to drought emergencies without weakening agricultural water rights and potential impacts to local recreation stream-based economies.
- The **Industrial Water Users** proposal to allow absolute water rights held by coal-fired power plants to be used for environmental and agricultural needs while the energy industry adapts to a post-carbon future is an innovative, proactive measure with multiple benefits.
- **Advancing forest health and protecting natural stream processes** are important to ensure that, in our efforts to account for every drop of our limited water supplies, we don't lose the important ecosystem services provided by healthy headwaters stream systems. These include reducing pre and post wildfire risks, improving water quality, and increasing drought resilience by enhancing late-season streamflows.
- Proposed measures to **enhance our ability to measure, manage and wisely use water**, whether through rules, upgrades to municipal and agricultural infrastructure or turf removal, will all help Coloradans stretch our limited water supplies to generate as much truly beneficial use as possible.

- We applaud the proactivity of the proposed resolution on key principles for any future conserved consumptive use program as a first step in considering how to make such a program work for all Coloradans.

Finally, in order to enhance inclusivity and encourage Coloradans to take advantage of federal funding opportunities, we also urge you to support access to clean, safe drinking water for tribes and ensure that tribes have equitable access to all programs, as well as advance the proposal to continue the CWCB's **Community & Technical Assistance Grants Program**. Not every community has the same resources to apply for grants. Particularly, rural and disadvantaged communities often face considerable barriers in accessing federal and state funding for water projects, which this program can help overcome.

Thank you again for your hard work to find solutions to make Colorado's communities and environment more resilient to drought and your openness to receiving public comment during your deliberations.

Sincerely,

American Rivers  
Audubon of the Rockies  
Business for Water Stewardship  
Conservation Colorado  
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership