

August 9, 2023

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

Congratulations on being appointed to the task force that will recommend solutions to one of the most pressing issues in Colorado today: the diminishing flows of the Colorado River. Dwindling water supplies from the Colorado River Basin and other rivers is already having and will continue to have detrimental impacts on communities and waterways across the state. Thank you for bringing your skills and time to this critical conversation.

As organizations with missions to protect Colorado's natural resources for the benefit of people and the environment, we know that Colorado's rivers, streams, and lakes are a core part of our identity, key to our Colorado way of life, and fundamental to sustaining our successful economy. Over the last year, Coloradans marveled at above-average snowpack and a rainy spring, yet already we are seeing drought conditions return to our state. Persistent, unprecedented drought and aridification of Colorado and the West will continue to constrain our ability to satisfy water users, environmental needs, and interstate obligations.

The Colorado Water Conservation Board and Becky Mitchell, our Commissioner to the Upper Colorado River Commission, have made commitments and taken a number of actions to protect Colorado's rivers and its allocations on the River, which we applaud. These include a wide range of state and partner actions in the Colorado Water Plan and an overarching commitment to better integrate watershed health throughout all phases of water supply and resilience planning. A variety of recent state plans and processes highlight the need to and outline specific positions intended to protect Colorado in drier times; the success of these documents largely hinge on significant conservation commitments being made in the Lower Basin states and we support ongoing efforts to protect Coloradans through this interstate dialogue.

At the same time, Colorado has both a need and opportunity to be proactive within its boundaries to ensure we are prepared to address drought and its impacts to our communities, water users, and rivers, regardless of the actions or inactions in other states.

The General Assembly charged this task force to "develop recommendations for state legislation that provides additional tools...in the development of programs that address drought in the Colorado River Basin and interstate commitments related to the Colorado River and its tributaries through conservation of the waters of the Colorado River and its tributaries."

As task force members, you have the opportunity to take meaningful action to help secure the state's water future. We urge you to build on the actions already being taken, the wealth of previous discussions within the water community, and your collective expertise and insights to address the needs of the River itself along with the needs of agriculture, cities, and industry. In the long run, the health of the River we depend on depends on us, and resilient watersheds and rivers benefit everyone.

We specifically ask that you integrate the following guiding principles as critical to maximizing the opportunity for this task force to fully execute the ambitious charge set for it by the legislature:

Transparency and inclusivity are key to success. All water users have a stake in what the task force will recommend to the General Assembly. The Colorado River supports the majority of Coloradans, all of whom are seeing the signs of drought and climate change all around them

and are grappling with what this means for their daily lives. Moreover, each water user and member of the public also has unique insights, based on their particular circumstances, that can inform well-rounded solutions. As such, it is vital for the task force to: (1) promote transparency by continuing to provide the public opportunities to attend task force meetings and be apprised of task force discussion and developments; and (2) invite public comment and consider public input as part of the task force proceedings.

Now is the time to be proactive. The stability of the Colorado River Basin is of paramount importance, both to water users and to the environment. Now is the time to prepare for the conditions we may have to endure and not merely wait and see if we have to do anything. To this end, Colorado must be proactive in developing our capacity to ensure that our water users and rivers can continue to thrive in the face of challenges from both climate change and possible interstate obligations. This includes developing the tools and systems (via laws, funding, and partnerships as needed) for Colorado to weather an uncertain future.

The environment needs protecting alongside our communities and economies. The natural systems and resources in the Colorado River Basin provide the foundation upon which we all depend. There is limited understanding of the risks, vulnerabilities, magnitude, or persistence of impacts to river systems from droughts of different levels of severity, duration, and/or locations. Integrating knowledge of ecological drought risks and impacts to river systems into planning processes may lessen cascading hazards. Reliable water supplies are dependent on healthy functioning rivers and riparian areas, and so protecting and restoring our rivers must be a top priority for the task force.

While water stresses and uncertainties concerning the Colorado River Basin may have been inevitable amid the long-term drought that has been accelerated by climate change, that is no excuse for exacerbating the deterioration of our critical natural resources going forward. Colorado needs collaborative solutions to drought that ensure healthy rivers and the wildlife that depend on them are prioritized alongside efforts to support growing our food and raising livestock, protecting and sustaining local economies, and providing clean water for all. The Upper Colorado River Endangered Fish Recovery Program and numerous community-based Stream and Integrated Water Management Plans, as well as [Action 5.5 of the revised Colorado Water Plan](#), provide valuable examples and ideas to build on.

Take advantage of funding opportunities: Responding to drought within Colorado and as a part of the interstate community calls for time, resources, and commitment. The programs needed to address drought in the basin must be effectively developed, implemented and administered. Strategies include improvements in agricultural infrastructure and operations, implementing responsibly flexible water management systems and water conservation programs, and providing habitat restoration and other watershed investments that provide wildfire protection and improve climate resilience. The Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provide opportunities to fund these and other similar needs that Colorado should maximize the fullest extent possible. Colorado should not delay in making sure it is well positioned to take advantage of federal and state funds.

Thank you again for your willingness and commitment to serve the state of Colorado by participating on the Colorado River Drought Task Force. Your commitment to find solutions to address drought impacts to our environment and communities will secure a better future for Coloradans across the state.

Sincerely,

American Rivers
Audubon
Business for Water Stewardship
Conservation Colorado
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited

Cc:
Office of Governor Jared Polis
Commissioner Becky Mitchell
Senator Dylan Roberts
Senator Perry Will
Speaker of the House Julie McCluskie
Representative Marc Catlin