



NEWS

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Interior, Lower Colorado Basin Leaders Launch 50-year, \$626 Million Wildlife Conservation Program

HOOVER DAM – Interior Department and Lower Colorado Basin leaders today launched a 50-year conservation initiative that provides more than \$626 million in federal and local funding to protect fish and wildlife along 400 miles of the lower Colorado River, while meeting the needs of farmers, tribes, industries and urban residents who rely on the river for water and power supplies.

Craig Manson, Interior's assistant secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, represented Secretary Gale Norton at the event, speaking on her behalf. Norton was unable to attend. Tom Weimer, Interior's acting assistant secretary for Water and Science, and John Keys, the Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, also represented the department.

"This agreement secures environmental protection and economic growth by using a forward-looking, partnership approach," said Manson. "This conservation plan will provide a comprehensive solution that was developed over the past decade. Our partners include federal and state wildlife managers and those communities and agencies that rely on the Colorado and would be most affected by a water-supply conflict. The agreement ensures that Arizona, California, Nevada, and the federal government will cooperate over the next 50 years to restore and protect habitat along the Colorado River."

The wide-ranging, regional partnership established today includes six state agencies, six tribes, 36 cities and water and power authorities, and six federal agencies. These entities serve more than 20 million residents and irrigate two million acres of farmland. Public interest groups also participate.

"This historic initiative has been a major environmental priority of this administration, which believes that the best conservation decisions are made by state and local authorities, with the federal government acting as catalyst and coordinator," Manson said. "These partnerships are the best bulwark against water crises and the best assurance of reliable water flows. They can preserve and protect the lives of species and the livelihoods of people. Environmental protection can and should be a partner with economic growth."

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Known as the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program, the conservation plan is designed to benefit at least 26 species. The partnership will restore a range of habitats along the lower Colorado River, including 8,132 acres of riparian, marsh and backwater habitat for six federally-protected species and at least 20 other species that are native to the river system.

By meeting the needs of fish and wildlife under the Endangered Species Act and preventing the listing of additional species, the plan provides greater certainty of continued water and power supplies from the river for Nevada, California and Arizona – and is designed to allow future water transfers for these states.

Today's agreement calls for the Program's conservation work to be cooperatively funded over the next 50 years. The federal government and local agencies are each contributing 50 percent of the \$626 million cost of the program, which will be indexed annually for inflation to ensure adequate funding in the future for species protection. The effort will be carried out along 400 miles of the main stem of the lower Colorado River from Lake Mead to the Mexican border and includes the Colorado River's historic floodplain and all the reservoirs to their full capacity.

The goal is to restore biological functions in four habitat types along the river: aquatic, emergent marshes, lower terrace cottonwood and willow riparian woodlands, and upper terrace native mesquite bosques. Collectively, these habitats are needed to help recover federally protected species, including the endangered bonytail, razorback sucker, humpback chub, Yuma clapper rail, and southwestern willow flycatcher.

The initiative also will improve conditions for other species – from songbirds to frogs and a rare plant – in ways that reduce their likelihood of ever needing to be protected by the Endangered Species Act. Restoring wetlands and riparian forests will benefit scores of bird species – hummingbirds to ducks – that annually traverse the desert when migrating between their northern U.S. and Canadian breeding grounds to Mexican and other southern wintering areas.

The restoration effort will offset the effects of water delivery and hydroelectric power production by the Bureau of Reclamation and other water and power users. The Multi-Species Conservation Program will minimize and mitigate harm to federally protected species and provide Endangered Species Act clearance for other tribal, federal and state land and water management actions.

“This agreement is our nation's most innovative partnership to address the needs of threatened and endangered fish and wildlife on a river,” Manson said at the ceremony along the banks of the Colorado River below Hoover Dam. “Thanks to the courage and foresight of state leaders and this administration's belief in conservation through cooperation, we can look forward to decades of collaborative efforts to restore and enhance habitat along the lower Colorado River.”