

# Communicating the Future of the Colorado River: Navigating Water, Policy, and Public Engagement

**Michael Elizabeth Sakas**

Colorado River Communications Specialist  
& Division of Water Resources Communications

2016- 2023  
CPR News

Reporter & Host

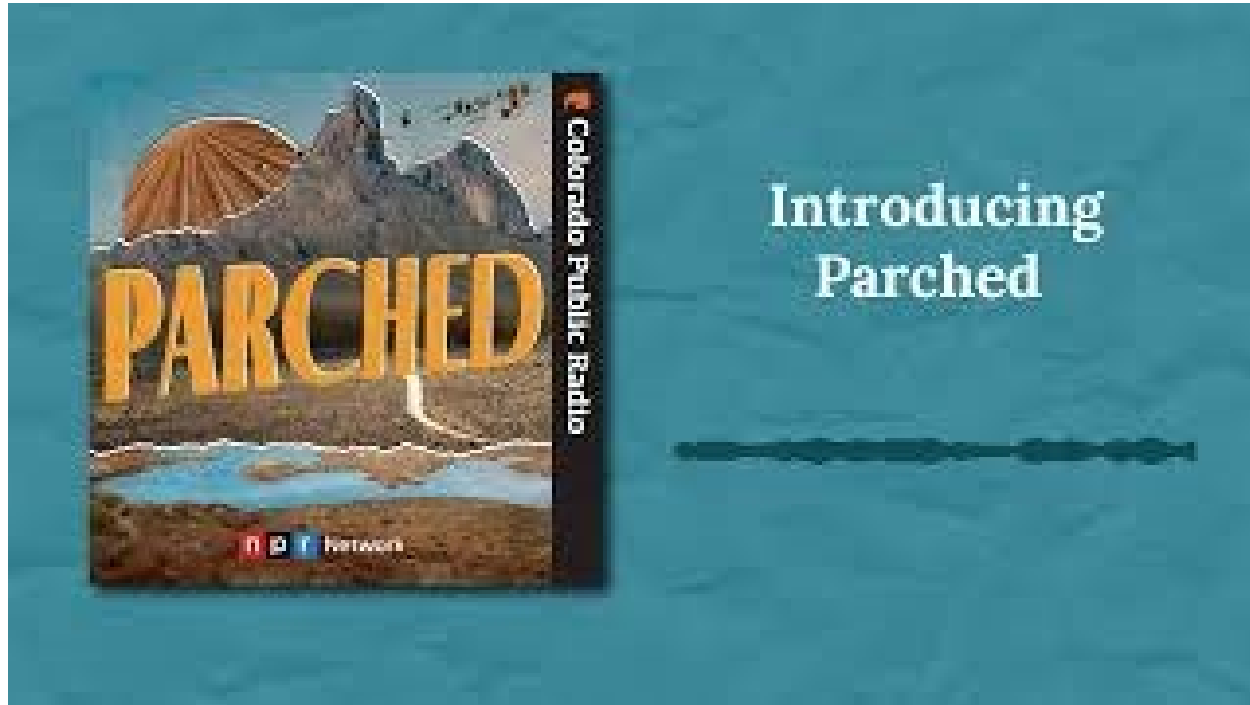
2023 - Present

CO Department of Natural  
Resources

Different roles!  
Distinction needed :)

# Journalism

## 'Parched' Podcast Series



# Solutions-Based Journalism

What are people talking about?

- Desalination
- Efficient farming
- Clean drinking water & Tribes
- Water recycling
- Municipal efficiently (Las Vegas)
- Moving water (Mississippi?)
- 'Demand Management'
- Water pricing
- Environmental restoration



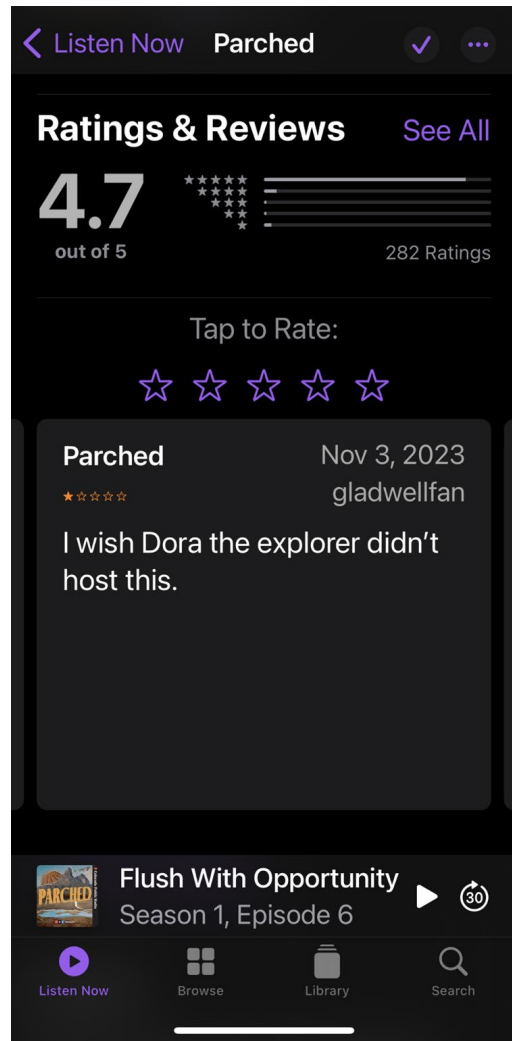
# Focus on Someone's Story (and bring it to life in a location!)



From top left: Michael Elizabeth Sakas, CPR News climate reporter and host of "Parched," in Collbran, Colorado; Lake Mead, Arizona; Yuma, Arizona; and Baia, Mexico.

# The Goal?

Take a very complicated and often seemingly “boring” topic and make it fun, educational and enlightening. We wanted anyone who was curious to find the show clear and enjoyable. We reached lots of folks!



# *Colorado River* Communication Efforts & Tools

**Michael Sakas**

Colorado River Communications  
Specialist - DNR

[michael.sakas@state.co.us](mailto:michael.sakas@state.co.us)



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# The Goal?

Different but similar! How do I help people understand a complicated issue, with the focus on Colorado and how the state is protecting its water and users.

We're talking to lots of people! The public, politicians, other states, the media, internally, externally, etc on lots of complicated issues.

Example? What the heck is 'hydrologic shortage'??

Tell the story!

# Webinar Example



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## Panel: Taking Cuts to Your Colorado River Water Supply

### **Hannah Cranor-Kersting**

Rancher, Gunnison County Extension Director,  
Gunnison, CO

### **Mike Camblin**

Rancher, board president of the Maybell  
Irrigation District, Maybell, CO

### **Letisha Yazzie**

Water Resource Director, Ute Mountain Ute  
Tribe, Towaoc, CO

### **Ken Curtis**

General Manager, Dolores Water Conservancy  
District, Arriola, CO

A webinar slide with a background image of a river flowing through a green field. The slide features the title "Colorado River Updates from the Commission" in large, bold, black text. Below the title, the name "Becky Mitchell" is displayed in bold, followed by her title "Colorado River Commissioner" and "State of Colorado". At the bottom left of the slide, there are logos for the Colorado Water Conservation Board and the Department of Natural Resources. On the right side of the slide, there is a vertical stack of five small video thumbnails showing participants: Michael Elizabeth Salas, Rebecca Mitchell, Mike Camblin, Letisha Yazzie, and Ken Curtis.

Turning this into a podcast episode,  
email me if you'd like access to video



"It was nice to hear directly from ranchers trying to keep their ranches going in scary water times during water cuts in dry years. As a Denver resident I rarely get the chance to directly hear ranchers' point of views. I was struck by their heartfelt emotion and responsibility they felt to previous generations to keep a family business operating. ... Compelling. Real sense of anxiety for ranchers and variability of the water supply. Helps me get a handle on the difference between Upper and Lower Basin water supplies and how Upper Basin really does rely so much more on year-to-year supplies."

- Reporter

# Infographics



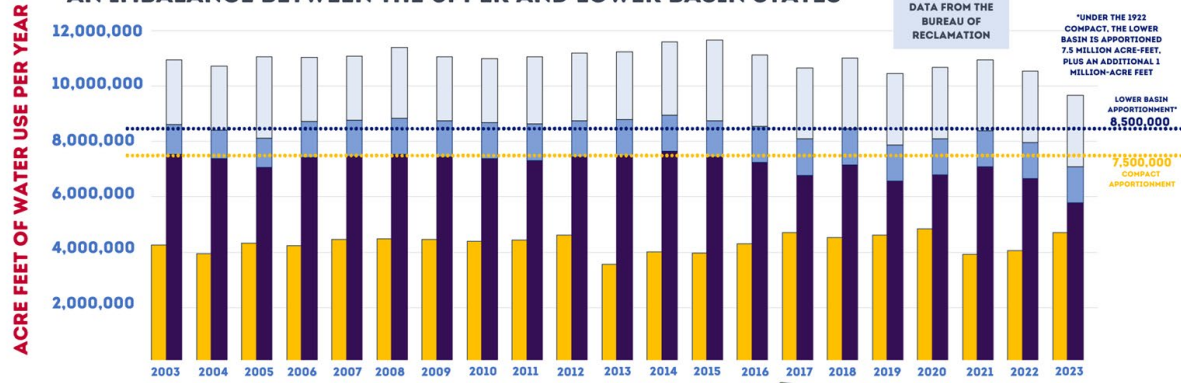
## COMPARING COLORADO RIVER WATER USE: AN IMBALANCE BETWEEN THE UPPER AND LOWER BASIN STATES



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Department of Natural Resources

DATA FROM THE  
BUREAU OF  
RECLAMATION

\*UNDER THE 1922  
COMPACT, THE LOWER  
BASIN IS APPOINTIONED  
7.5 MILLION ACRE-FEET,  
PLUS AN ADDITIONAL 1  
MILLION-ACRE FEET

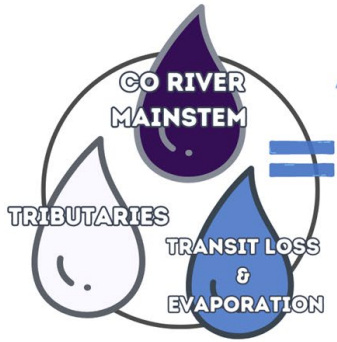


LOWER BASIN  
APPOINTIONMENT\*  
**8,500,000**

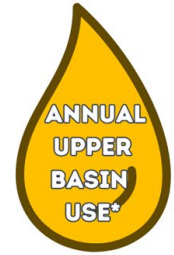
7,500,000  
COMPACT  
APPOINTIONMENT

**LOWER  
BASIN STATES**

**UPPER  
BASIN STATES**



**ANNUAL  
LOWER  
BASIN  
USE**



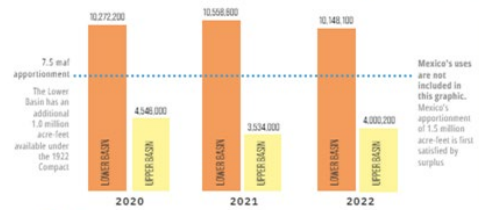
\*UPPER BASIN USE INCLUDES  
ALL MAINSTEM, TRIBUTARY,  
EVAPORATION & TRANSIT  
LOSSES COMBINED

# Where the Water is Used



## WHERE THE WATER IS USED

COLORADO RIVER BASIN



### WATER USE BY BASIN

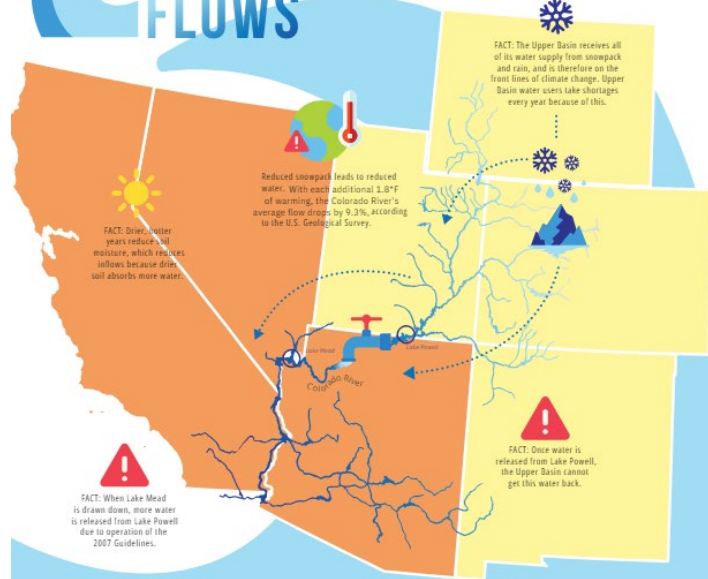
Lower Basin use includes Mainstem Colorado River deliveries, evaporation and transit losses, and estimated tributary use.

Lower Basin tributary uses have not been reported since 2005.

Updated March 2024

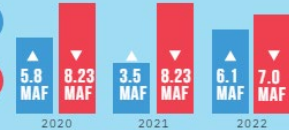
## WHERE THE WATER FLOWS

COLORADO RIVER BASIN



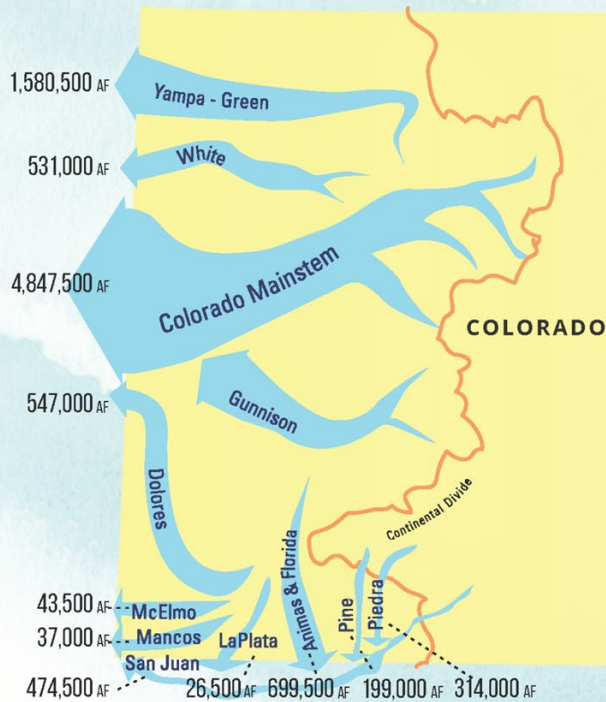
### WATER THAT FLOWED INTO LAKE POWELL

### WATER RELEASED FROM LAKE POWELL INTO LAKE MEAD



Unregulated Inflow, 24-Month Study, Bureau of Reclamation

# WHAT COLORADO CONTRIBUTES



**9,300,000** ACRE-FEET (AF)

**AVERAGE AMOUNT OF WATER THAT FLOWS WEST ANNUALLY**

## EFFORTS THAT SUPPORT A HEALTHY COLORADO RIVER



### WATER PLAN GRANTS PROGRAM

**\$87M IN AWARDS** for multibenefit water projects across the State that conserve water and promote efficiency, including a **\$1.5M GRANT** for water-wise landscaping.



### WATER LOSS PREVENTION

**MILLIONS INVESTED** in the CO Water Loss Initiative. Colorado trained over 90 water utilities across the state; 50 utilities identified over **20,000 ACRE-FEET** in preventable losses in Phase 1.



### WATERSHED RESTORATION

Awarded more than **\$22 MILLION** to restore and protect the headwater watersheds of the Colorado River, build wildfire and flood resilience, stabilize streams, and reconnect land and water.



### AVERAGE ANNUAL SHORTAGES

Colorado regularly takes significant hydrologic shortages averaging **600,000 ACRE-FEET PER YEAR** through strict priority administration. The Upper Division States shortages average **1.3M ACRE-FEET PER YEAR**.



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Department of Natural Resources



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Upper Colorado River Commissioner

Department of Natural Resources

Updated June 2024

# UDS Alternative FAQ



## A Sustainable Colorado River UPPER DIVISION STATES ALTERNATIVE FAQ

**What is the purpose of the UDS Alternative?**

The Upper Division States Alternative (UDS Alternative) was submitted to the Bureau of Reclamation by Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. Reclamation will model the UDS Alternative as part of the NEPA process for Post-2026 Operations of Lake Powell and Lake Mead. The Alternative presents a way to operate Lake Powell and Lake Mead based on observed, real-world hydrologic conditions (instead of unreliable forecasts). The plan would help rebuild storage in the reservoirs and protect water users and resources. The current guidelines expire in 2026.

**How will the UDS Alternative improve Colorado River management?**

Under the guidelines in place through 2026, more water is regularly released from Lake Powell and Lake Mead than flows in. These large downstream releases support overuse in the Lower Basin States. The current guidelines tie together the operations of Powell and Mead, so the drawdown of Mead consequently causes a drawdown of Powell as well. This has caused both reservoirs to reach critically low elevations in recent years. The UDS Alternative is designed to operate within the means of the river by only releasing what is available in a given year based on storage conditions.

**Are there conservation proposals in the UDS Alternative?**

The UDS Alternative will consider 'parallel activities' that support Upper Basin resilience and protect Lake Powell. These potential activities would be separate from the post-2026 NEPA process. The activities could include voluntary conservation and potential releases from the Colorado River Storage Project Act Initial Unit reservoirs, which include Flaming Gorge, the Aspinall Unit (Blue Mesa), and Navajo, in order to protect Lake Powell's ability to continue to release water.

Help tell the story of why Colorado River water is important to Colorado

**(720)-624-6723**



Call us and leave a voicemail about what it's like to take cuts to your water supply



[michael.sakas@state.co.us](mailto:michael.sakas@state.co.us)

[www.cwcb.colorado.gov/ColoradoRiver](http://www.cwcb.colorado.gov/ColoradoRiver)

[www.cwcb.colorado.gov/colorado-river-commissioners-corner](http://www.cwcb.colorado.gov/colorado-river-commissioners-corner)



**COLORADO**  
Upper Colorado River  
Commissioner

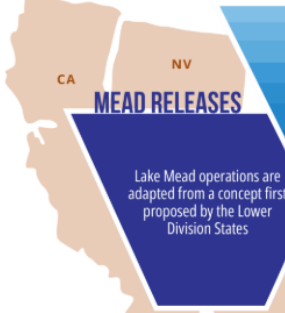
## UPPER DIVISION STATES ALTERNATIVE FOR POST-2026 OPERATIONS

### OF LAKE POWELL AND LAKE MEAD

Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming's alternative provides for **sustainable** operations that are aligned with **hydrologic conditions**, help to **rebuild storage**, and **operate within the Law of the River**.

### 1 POWELL OPERATIONS

Lake Powell releases are aligned with hydrologic conditions, which helps re-build storage and adapts to variability



### POWELL RELEASES

100% FULL  
Releases as required for dam safety

81% - 100% FULL  
8.1 - 9.0 MAF per year

20% - 81% FULL  
6.0 - 8.1 MAF per year

< 20% FULL  
6.0 MAF per year

### 2 LAKE MEAD OPERATIONS

Modeled Lower Basin operations call for reductions in use depending upon reservoir conditions, with Lower Basin reductions of 1.5 million acre-feet under most conditions

### 3 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

#### PARALLEL ACTIVITIES

Under agreements separate from the Post-2026 NEPA process, Upper Basin actions could include CRSPA\* initial units and voluntary conservation, and acknowledgement of undeveloped settled Tribal water rights

\*Colorado River Storage Project Act

#### CONTINUED COLLABORATION

The Upper Division States are committed to continued collaboration with the Bureau of Reclamation, Basin States, Tribal Nations, water users, and environmental and recreation groups

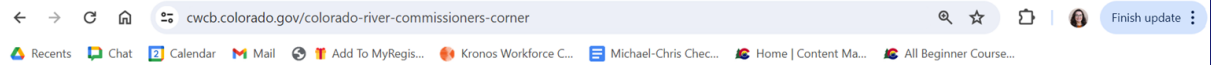


# Commissioner's Corner

[cwcb.colorado.gov/colorado-river-commissioners-corner](http://cwcb.colorado.gov/colorado-river-commissioners-corner)



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Updates

Events

News Stories

Infographics

Request Speaking Engagement

## Colorado River Commissioner's Corner

### About Commissioner Mitchell

Becky Mitchell was appointed by Governor Polis to represent Colorado in the [Upper Colorado River Commission](#) (UCRC). The UCRC includes one Commissioner from each of the Upper Colorado River Basin states (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming) who work together on interstate collaboration for the [Colorado River](#), which flows 1,450 miles across the Western U.S. and into Mexico.

The UCRC was established in 1948 with the goal of facilitating discussion, collaboration, and decision-making among the Upper Division States.

[In her role as Commissioner](#), Mitchell works with a team of Colorado's water experts



# Upper Division States Alternative

[cwcb.colorado.gov/coloradoriver](http://cwcb.colorado.gov/coloradoriver)



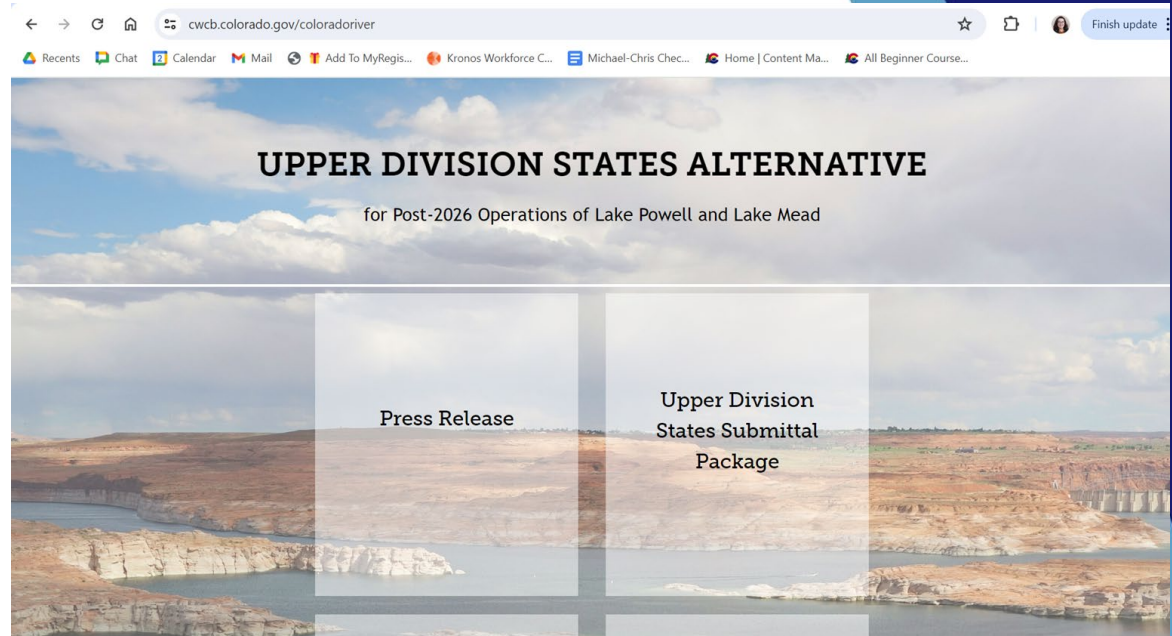
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Press Release

Submittal Package

Infographic

FAQ





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## COMMISSIONER'S CORNER

Regular Colorado River Updates



# Stay Informed

Want emailed updates? We  
can add you to our email list!

[michael.sakas@state.co.us](mailto:michael.sakas@state.co.us)



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