

U.S. Senator Mark Kelly Remarks as Prepared for Delivery at the 2022 Colorado River Water Users Association Conference

Thank you, Aaron, for that introduction.

I'm honored to be at this year's annual conference of the Colorado River Water Users Association.

In a moment, you will hear from senior officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Reclamation, the International Boundary and Water Commission, and representatives from Mexico.

But for now, I'll update you on recent actions by Congress and share my perspective on this drought crisis.

I'll begin by saying this: Washington has a vested interest in the Basin's resilience to drought.

As someone who never planned to run for elected office, I often analyze big challenges using my background as a pilot, astronaut, and engineer.

Fittingly, tomorrow will mark 21 years since I returned home from my first mission into space aboard space shuttle Endeavour.

That mission gave me a totally different perspective, literally, on the Colorado River.

I remember looking down out the flight deck windows for the first time.

I saw what I thought was a large mountain range. I was curious, so I asked the shuttle commander – 'Hey, what mountain is that?'

He said – that's not a mountain. That's a big hole in the ground.

Turns out, it was the Colorado River running through the Grand Canyon.

I'll never forget that moment, looking from space down at the Colorado River carving its way through the west.

Before I was elected to the Senate, I spent 25 years serving in the Navy, 15 of those at NASA. These jobs required a very technical yet broad set of knowledge and skills.

But I have to say, while I bring that education and experience to the job, I've learned that water policy is rather complicated.

That's why over the past few years I've spent time meeting with and listening to the people who work with water for a living: farmers, businesses, tribal communities, water experts, and federal, state, and local agencies. Some of those folks are here today.

I've talked with Senate colleagues and Governors from the Upper and Lower Basins.

I've convened and chaired committee hearings on Western drought.

And in my first six months in the Senate, I got to work on this: negotiating with both Republicans and Democrats to secure \$8.3 billion in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law for Western water infrastructure and ecosystem restoration.

\$3 billion of that is already repairing leaking dams and canals across the West.

This is all to say: I've spent the last two years making sure Washington pays attention to the Basin.

My colleagues have come to learn that every week I check water elevations in Lake Mead and Lake Powell.

They are about one-quarter full, storing much less water today than on that first shuttle mission 21 years ago.

Back in 2001, Lake Powell's lowest elevation was 3,657 feet above sea level. Next year, Powell's projected high point will be 115 feet lower.

Lake Mead's lowest elevation in 2001 was 1,117 feet. Next year, Mead will top off at 1,046 feet.

Two decades of below-average runoff and drier soil means the Basin faces an annual deficit of 2 to 4 million acre-feet.

So, that's why we're here.

Whether your water is sourced by compact, contract, treaty, or decree, it is not in anyone's interest to allow the Colorado River System to crash. There are a lot of reasons for that.

Our shared use of the Colorado River supports the quality of life we enjoy today.

Together, the Basin grows over 100 million tons of vegetables and forage every year, from Colorado to Yuma to the Imperial Irrigation District.

This abundance feeds the nation and fuels economies within our seven states and Mexico.

Tourism and outdoor recreation from the river generates billions in economic activity annually.

And as our population grows, the importance of protecting the System grows too.

Some may differ on the solutions. But we know that inaction is not the answer.

And insufficient action will mean serious consequences for the entire Basin.

Because if a solution is not developed by the Basin, Commissioner Touton ["too-tin"] will figure it out for us.

And as much as I enjoy working with the Commissioner, I think it's better for everyone if the Federal government doesn't make these tough decisions.

That sentiment is shared by many of my Senate colleagues. No matter what Basin state we represent, we all want water users to take the lead.

When the Inflation Reduction Act was introduced earlier this year, folks across the country praised it as a major step towards addressing climate change.

But after reading the draft bill, it was clear that funding for Western drought was left out.

That's when I spoke to Senator Manchin about this and told him we can't have a climate bill that doesn't address Western drought. I told him we needed to include resources for mitigation and system conservation.

Then I encouraged my colleagues from other Western states to reach out and do the same.

Senator Manchin initially came back with an offer of \$1 billion.

But that wasn't enough for a problem this size.

I told him about hydrology and sublimation, and the different tiers in the Lower Basin Drought Contingency Plan.

We talked about how Hoover and Glen Canyon were nearing minimum power pool.

And we talked about food prices.

I told him how farmers in Yuma produce around 90 percent of the nation's winter lettuce.

Ultimately, Senator Manchin agreed, and the Inflation Reduction Act was signed into law with \$4 billion for drought mitigation, prioritized for this Basin. That's what the law says.

Of course, this funding isn't enough to solve a drought that spans decades and half of the United States. Perhaps no amount of federal funding can.

But it can soften the blow and help water users conserve water in Mead and Powell.

And it's what I mean when I say -- Washington wants the Basin to find a solution.

I believe Congress can and should do more.

The Federal government has a unique relationship with 33 sovereign tribal governments in the Basin. Arizona is home to 22 of them. Many hold significant rights and claims to water.

Quantifying those rights and empowering tribes to conserve should be one of our priorities.

This year, I introduced a bill that allows a tribe in Arizona to do that.

The Colorado River Indian Tribes -- "CRIT" for short -- is a tribe located on the banks of the river in western Arizona. A Supreme Court judgement gives them rights to more than 600,000 acre-feet of Colorado River water in Arizona.

CRIT uses a hand-dug flood irrigation system built by the Bureau of Indian Affairs more than 100-years ago.

I spent time with the CRIT community last November, visiting some of their farmland. I saw how water escapes their system. In some spots, seepage from canals bleeds into idle farmland packed with salt cedar, an invasive species.

With limited resources, the tribe can't recapitalize or modernize its water system.

On top of that, a law dating back to the 1790s prevents CRIT from leasing their water off-reservation. So, a lot of their water goes to waste.

We can change that.

My bill would allow the tribe to reduce water use on the reservation, and use that water for leases, storage, or conservation off the reservation.

For the tribe, this bill is a pathway to more efficient farming practices and investing in drip irrigation.

They've been experimenting with drip already, demonstrating a 40 percent higher yield using 50 percent less water.

For Basin water users, this bill could lead to tens of thousands of acre-feet of water that can be conserved for use or storage in Lake Mead.

Another things Congress must do is respond to the impacts of declining hydropower generation.

Reservoirs across the West are storing less and less water.

If Glen Canyon Dam stops generating hydropower, five million people, including rural farming communities, will pay a lot more for electricity from other sources.

That's why I introduced legislation to direct the Bureau of Reclamation and the Western Area Power Administration to defray some of those higher costs for hydropower customers.

I'll keep working to get this bill across the finish line.

The Federal government is asking a lot of the Basin. We need the government to step up and be bold, too.

Congressional delegations from each of the Basin states should cooperate to secure drought assistance in the next Farm Bill.

And now is the time to take a serious look at augmentation projects that were once dismissed as too ambitious, like largescale desalinization plans and importing water from other Basins.

These are ambitious ideas, but they are no more ambitious than Hoover Dam and Glen Canyon Dam when they were first conceived.

Moving water, protecting our fragile ecosystems, and learning to live and prosper during drought are not mutually exclusive futures for our Basin.

Building that future for the Colorado River starts here.

There is no country better at solving big engineering problems than the United States. We can innovate our way out of the challenges we face.

All we need to do is to work together. And I'm looking forward to continuing that work alongside all of you.

To all of you, the Colorado River Water Users Association and Commissioner Touton, I appreciate you inviting me to participate in today's conference.

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