

Mitchell shares priorities in ongoing Colorado River negotiations

State water commissioner meets with local leaders

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Becky Mitchell, Colorado’s representative on the Upper Colorado River Commission, has devised a set of “irrefutable truths” for the state as the rules for managing the water of the Colorado River are rewritten.

On Monday, Aug. 28, Mitchell visited the Gunnison Valley in hope of collecting stories about how the community uses and values its water. Although she works closely with the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District general counsel John McClow, this was her first in-person visit to a board meeting.

“My thought process as we’re sitting down with these other states is saying, ‘What is Colorado willing to tolerate? What are we willing to do and what are some of our boundaries?’” Mitchell said.

The seven Colorado River Basin states are working to temporarily revise the operating guidelines of Lake Powell and Lake Mead, two of the largest reservoirs in the United States. Mitchell said she has stayed focused on the “long game,”

finding solutions that will save the overused river system and the communities that depend on it before it’s too late.

This June, Mitchell became Colorado’s first full-time Upper Colorado River commissioner, a role designed to strengthen the state’s position in interstate negotiations. These conversations are focused downstream, but the Upper Basin states have also been under pressure to contribute to a solution as the impacts of drought linger in the West.

(Editor’s note: Below is an excerpt from her presentation. It has been edited for length and clarity.)

The first thing is, climate change is real. The reason I say that is. it’s not whether we believe in climate change or not, we don’t have to have that discussion. We’re going to have a more variable future, and it could be hotter and drier. Or we may have hydrology at times that we don’t expect. What I want to focus on communicating is that we need flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing conditions, and not just us in the Upper Basin.

When there’s no water in the system, we’re not putting water on the ground or on the crops. The cattle are not able to eat the crops because of the lack of water. We are living on the frontlines of climate change, when it is drier, we respond

immediately. That is not necessarily the case across the basin. Yes, reservoirs are there to kind of equalize the flow. But when we’ve seen crisis to crisis in the media, it’s because there’s crisis to crisis on the ground. And that’s not responsible management.

The second irrefutable truth is that water users in the Lower Basin are not more important than users in the Upper Basin. We absolutely have to stand together. Nobody is more important than anyone else. What I’ve seen is a real push to continue on the way we have been — using over 9 million acre-feet a year in the Lower Basin, while we’re using somewhere between 3.5 to 4.5 million acre-feet in the entire Upper Basin. And [they’re] saying, ‘Well, what else can you give?’

I am sitting in the area right next to Blue Mesa. You all are very aware of the emergency release that occurred. That took us all by surprise. There was no more than a little over a week’s notice, eight days to be exact. And what that said to me was they viewed our uses as ‘less than.’ They viewed our recreational income in this community as less than. Those releases were made at a time when we couldn’t be sure how far that water went. Those releases were also made at a time that we were sure it would decimate the recreational economy in this

area. And it did. Right before Labor Day weekend. I took great offense to that.

That being said, we know these reservoirs are here for a reason. But that was not the way that they should have been operated at that moment. It was not the way they should have been operated to sustain continued overuse. That was the issue for me. We are all about being a part of a solution. We’re not about being part of continuing the problem.

My next irrefutable truth is defending against curtailment. The intention of a demand management pool was to defend against a curtailment. It is not for continued Lower Basin overuse. And so we are in full compliance of the Colorado River Compact, and I want to make sure that we all know we always have been.

Part of what we’re trying to do is tell the story. When we talk about the sheer amount of money that’s going into this, and the impacts of that, this is not just money for the Lower Basin, or for the Upper Basin. This is the American people’s money because they want to stop the fear. If there are not permanent reductions that we see because of that money, we have failed. One of our responsibilities is to hold people accountable. If the money runs out, and we have not solved the problem, the money runs dry and so will the river.

The next point is trying to protect the system and the critical infrastructure at Lake Powell and Lake Mead and prevent attempts to look upstream. If you look at the start of the NEPA process for the post 2026 [guidelines], the feds put out the notice of intent. Lots of interested parties responded, and I happened to get a hold of some of them. There was a lot that said ‘Let’s look at these upstream reservoirs as part of the entire system.’ That’s bull honkey, as far as I’m concerned. We know what they’re there for, but it’s not to be a part of propping up the continued sustained use. That creep up into the Upper Basin to continue to solve problems is not a solution. It just continues the problem.

We’re trying to figure out how to get the message out. One thing that we’ve said is, ‘They’ve expended their checking account in Mead and expended their savings account in Powell. Now they want to max out their credit cards and keep looking upstream at our other Upper Basin reservoirs. It just doesn’t make sense. It seems fairly simplistic to me that the answer is less use in the Lower Basin that’s responsive to hydrology.

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A view of the northern tip of Lake Powell near the Hite Bridge, right outside Blanding, Utah. (Photo by Abby Harrison)