

## Thinking Like a River Basin

*Leaders' Perspectives on Options and Opportunities in Colorado River Management*  
April 2011

### What's at Stake: The Future of the Colorado River

The Colorado River is the lifeblood of a huge swath of the American West. It supplies water to over 30 million residents in seven states and northwestern Mexico for cities, agriculture, recreation, and industry.

Yet after a decade of persistently dry weather, increasing water demand, and climate change, communities that rely on the Colorado face challenging times. Ongoing [research](#) shows that even under normal conditions, river flows have been barely sufficient to meet human needs. Fortunately, leaders and experts recognize this threat, and are committed to finding long-term solutions.



### About the Report

This new report paints a portrait of a river basin - and a leadership community - at a crossroads. All around the Colorado Basin, local efforts have been finding innovative ways to use water more efficiently, store it more effectively, and share it more equitably in drought years. Now, water leaders from across the spectrum are asking how they can use these local achievements as the building blocks for larger, basin-wide solutions. Since 2008, Carpe Diem West – a network of scientists, water managers, conservationists, and government leaders – has gathered diverse and influential stakeholders to focus on balanced, long-term solutions for the Colorado.

Carpe Diem West commissioned the [Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Policy at the University of Montana](#), to assess the current thinking of some of the basin's most influential leaders on the future of the river. [This report](#) consolidates the results of 29 interviews with a diverse cross-section of leaders. It provides a fascinating overview of what basin water interests think about the challenges facing the Colorado, as well as potential solutions.

### Key Findings

- Most basin leaders agree that, due to continued drought and increasing demand, the Colorado River Basin's water supply is barely able to meet current requirements, and they expect competition to increase in the future.
- While conflict over water rights may be unavoidable, leaders are committed to collaborative solutions, and to avoiding costly, protracted court battles.

- There is widespread support for preserving the 1922 Colorado River Compact, though some leaders favor additional agreements and interpretations of the Law of the River to address current concerns.
- Many leaders acknowledge that the time is ripe for a broader conversation, involving more diverse stakeholders - including recreational, Native American conservation, and other interests - on the future of the Colorado River.



The report 's findings are based on confidential interviews with:

**Robert Adler**, James I. Farr Chair in Law, University of Utah College of Law  
**Anne Castle**, Assistant Secretary for Water and Science, U.S. Department of Interior  
**Michael Connor**, Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation  
**John Enstrom**, Assistant General Manager, Southern Nevada Water Authority  
**David Getches**, Dean and Raphael J. Moses Professor of Natural Resources Law, University of Colorado Law School  
**Jennifer Gimbel**, Director, Colorado Water Conservation Board  
**Herb Guenther**, Director, Arizona Department of Water Resources  
**Taylor Hawes**, Director, Colorado River Program, The Nature Conservancy  
**Robert Johnson**, Former Commissioner, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation  
**Jeff Kightlinger**, General Manager/CEO, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California  
**Eric Kuhn**, General Manager, Colorado River Water Conservation District  
**John Leeper**, Branch Manager, Water Management, Department of Water Resources, Navajo Nation  
**John Leshy**, Harry D. Sunderland Distinguished Professor of Real Property Law, University of California Hastings College of the Law  
**Jim Lochhead**, CEO/Manager, Denver Water  
**Estevan Lopez**, Director, Interstate Stream Commission, New Mexico  
**Mario Lopez Perez**, Engineering and Technical Standards Manager, National Water Commission, Mexico  
**David Modeer**, General Manager, Central Arizona Project  
**Barry Nelson**, Director, Western Water Project, Natural Resources Defense Council  
**Jennifer Pitt**, Senior Analyst, Environmental Defense Fund  
**Mike Purcell**, Director, Wyoming Water Development Commission  
**Jack Schmidt**, Professor of Watershed Sciences, Utah State University  
**Dennis Strong**, Director, Division of Water Resources, State of Utah  
**Tanya Trujillo**, Counsel, Energy and Natural Resources Committee, U.S. Senate  
**Pat Tyrrell**, State Engineer, Wyoming  
**Brad Udall**, Director, Western Water Assessment  
**David Wegner**, Staff Director, Subcommittee on Water and Power, U.S. House of Representatives  
**Eric Wilkinson**, General Manager, Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District  
**Tony Willardson**, Executive Director, Western States Water Council  
**Jerry Zimmerman**, Executive Director, Colorado River Board of California

For more information, and to download the report: <http://www.carpediemwest.org/colorado-report>