

Jicarilla Apache Nation Water Sharing Project

Providing food, water, power, recreation, and much more, the mighty Colorado River is indispensable to the lives of tens of millions of people and a vast array of biodiversity. But water scarcity is pushing the region to the brink. We have years, not decades, to secure this precious resource for future generations.

What's at Stake

Stretching nearly 1,500 miles across seven states and two countries, the Colorado River provides drinking water to more than 40 million people, supports nearly 5 million acres of irrigated farmland, and sustains numerous plant and animal species—including several found nowhere else in the world. However, despite its vast regional importance, the dual crises of increased water demand and a changing climate are placing an unprecedented strain on the river, throwing its future—and the future of the plants, animals, and communities that rely on its flows—into jeopardy.

The Opportunity

Given the sheer geographic scale of the Colorado River, coming up with creative, scalable solutions to these urgent challenges will require meaningful collaboration with diverse individuals, groups, and governments. Building on our decades of history convening these types of partnerships for nature's benefit, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) recently joined forces with the Jicarilla Apache Nation and the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission (ISC) to co-create a first-of-its-kind water sharing agreement that—by supporting the needs of both Tribal and state governments, and of nature— could serve as a blueprint for similar projects throughout the Colorado River Basin and well beyond.

New Mexico's government has committed nearly \$5.7 million to the project and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation committed \$4 million in federal funds from the America the Beautiful challenge. Now it's time for TNC to step up to the table and demonstrate the strength of our fundraising efforts. By raising \$4.5 million, we can secure the future of this 10-year agreement.

A Win-Win-Win Water Solution in the Colorado River

Spanning more than 870,000 acres across north-central New Mexico, the Jicarilla Apache Nation holds more than 45,000 acre-feet of settled water rights in the San Juan River Basin, a vitally significant tributary which contributes on average 15% of the Upper Colorado River Basin flows. The

Nation's water rights secure access to water for the Nation to conduct cultural practices, provide drinking water to its community, and supply water for other domestic and commercial purposes on the reservation. These uses, however, currently require only a small portion of the Nation's water.

For the last several decades, the Nation leased its water to coal-fired power plants that are now facing closure. This transition presented an opportunity for the Nation to explore how its remaining water supply could be used to benefit nature. In 2022, this exploration culminated in a novel agreement between the Nation, TNC, and the ISC that allows the latter to lease up to 20,000-acre feet of water per year, for ten years, from the Nation to benefit threatened and endangered fish and increase water security for New Mexico. This agreement demonstrates how Tribal nations and state governments can work on a sovereign-to-sovereign basis—with support from conservation organizations—to find collaborative solutions that benefit multiple interests and users of the Colorado River.



Securing Water for Threatened and Endangered Fish

The San Juan River Basin is home to the endangered Colorado pikeminnow and razorback sucker, as well as several other species threatened by the shortage of water in the region. There is broad consensus among scientists and experts that a lack of habitat conditions for rearing these fish is the most critical missing component limiting their recovery. The River's low velocity backwater and riparian nursery habitats are currently created and maintained with the regular occurrence of high spring peak flows and summer base flows that connect to the mainstem river. The Jicarilla Apache Nation Water Sharing Project enables partners to learn how to release water to support these flows and the habitat they sustain.



Creating a Model for Effective Collaboration in the Colorado River

As the Colorado River water crisis continues, Tribal, state, and regional water managers are all looking to design effective water conservation programs that reduce water stress while benefiting both people and the environment. By creating a replicable solution amongst its partners, the Jicarilla Apache Nation Water Sharing Project is already catalyzing policy change in the Colorado River Basin and beyond.

“This project gives me hope that we can work together to restore the health of the San Juan River, my home river basin, and inspire others to build real, win-win-win solutions to the crisis in the Colorado River Basin.”

Celene Hawkins

Colorado River Tribal Partnerships Program Director