

Ducey: Arizona must continue conservation efforts, protect water



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TEMPE — Gov. **Doug Ducey** offered praise Tuesday for Arizona's past water planning and saving measures and warned that Lake Mead's continually dropping water levels must be addressed, but he made **no specific proposals for how to deal with them.**

Ducey also stressed the need for federally financed conservation efforts and for **augmenting the overtapped Colorado River, but again offered no specifics.**

He also said the state needs to be vigilant against efforts by the federal government to take away some of the state's water to help California, which he said is far less prepared to deal with the drought than Arizona.

But the governor, speaking to reporters before his talk, **rebuffed the idea that farming — cotton production in particular — makes no sense and should be phased out to save water.**

Agriculture in general uses about 70 percent of the state's water, although cotton's share of the state's crop load has declined sharply in recent years. The investigative website Pro Publica recently wrote a scathing denunciation of Central Arizona's cotton growing, saying it's a waste of water.

"Cotton is one of the five C's," Ducey said, referring to the concept that Arizona is built around cattle, copper, citrus, climate — and cotton. "It's going to continue to be one of the five C's."

Arizona is the national leader in conservation and water preparedness — "We're good at this," Ducey said before about 450 business leaders, politicians and government officials in Tempe. "Uncertainty and vulnerability surrounding our water supply remain. Managing that uncertainty and vulnerability is a part of Arizona history and continues to be a strategic goal for my administration and our state."

And he rejected any suggestion that the state could be only a decade away from running out of water for municipal use.

"We're standing right now in the fifth-largest metropolitan area in the country," the governor said. "Despite the uncertainties, vulnerabilities and challenges we face, Arizona does not face an immediate crisis."

"And we won't, as long as we follow the examples of those before us: **good planning, good management and good policy.**"

But the conditions on the river and at Lake Mead in particular don't match the governor's optimism.

This week, the lake is barely above 1,075 feet, federal records show, after having already dipped well below its lowest level since the Great Depression. At that level, the bureau can declare a shortage on the Colorado River, curtailing CAP deliveries to Central Arizona farmers.

But because Mead is expected to rise toward the end of this year, a shortage isn't considered likely until 2017, the bureau has said.

But in the past week, three Arizona water experts have said in interviews they're doubtful that Colorado River Basin states can find solutions to the lake's protracted water supply deficit in time to keep the lake from dropping to 1,000 feet.

Considered a possibility in five or so years, that's the point when water shortages for Phoenix, Tucson and Indian tribes are much more likely, and when Hoover Dam's power supply would be cut in half.

The most common solution advanced by water experts is for cities to buy water rights from farms using river water, by paying them to grow more efficiently or to let crops fallow so they're not using water.

"We're not going to let Denver, Salt Lake, Las Vegas, Tucson, Phoenix and San Diego go dry so we can continue to grow alfalfa in Grand Junction and cotton in El Centro," said **Chris Avery**, Tucson Water's chief counsel, in a recent interview. "But I don't think that a larger scale ag-to-urban transfer is on the immediate horizon."

Most cities such as Tucson and Phoenix are watching their water demands drop steeply, particularly on a per-person basis, meaning their needs for new supplies aren't immediate, Avery said.

Agreeing, University of Arizona law professor **Robert Glennon** said he's received numerous phone calls from people wanting to come to Arizona and wondering where the water will come from. Author of two books on water, Glennon said he doesn't think state officials in general are being candid enough about the state's water problems.

Grady Gammage, a former Central Arizona Project board president and a senior fellow at Arizona State University's Morrison Institute, agreed that chances aren't very good of avoiding the 1,000-foot threshold, but says there's a danger in making Mead's level the only measure of whether the water supply is in good or bad shape.

Mead's elevation is "entirely artificial," dependent on how the bureau manages all its reservoirs including Lake Powell, he said, adding that more water could be put in Mead at Powell's expense.

Despite the governor's lack of specifics, Gammage praised Ducey for pointing out issues the state needs to pay attention to now.

Sandy Bahr, director of the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon chapter, criticized the governor for failing to address the question of the role of agriculture in the desert. And Bahr, who was at the speech, derided Ducey's suggestion that the state must augment its water supply.

“Where are you going to get the water?” she asked. “You’ve already got a Colorado River that’s already overallocated.”

Her solution?

“We could stop growing crops like cotton and alfalfa that are super water-hungry and inefficient,” she said.

The Arizona Farm Bureau’s **Julie Murphree**, however, said cotton isn’t the water user it once was.

She said it used to take eight acre-feet of water annually for each acre of cotton. Now, with better seed varieties and more efficient irrigation practices, that has been cut in half.

Bahr, however, said that’s still a lot of water. And what’s worse, she said, is that the water is subsidized, with the Salt River Project, one of the major irrigation districts in Arizona, using profits from its electricity sales to keep costs down for farmers.

“Farming is a huge part of our economy,” gubernatorial press aide **Daniel Scarpinato** explained after the speech. “Of course the governor supports farming.”

And he questioned whether cutbacks in water use by farms is necessary.

“We’ve had farming and we’ve also protected our water usage,” Scarpinato said.