



Universal Access to Clean Water in the Colorado River Basin

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recently reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Native American people and communities. CDC concludes that “adequate health care and public health infrastructure resources are needed to support a culturally responsive public health effort.”

One essential component of “public health infrastructure” is access to clean water. But the U.S. Water Alliance reports that Native American households are nineteen times more likely than white households to lack indoor plumbing with running water, a shower or bath, and a flush toilet. Many homes and communities on Indian reservations within the Colorado River Basin do not have access to safe and clean drinking water. According to the Tribal Water Study “Access to a clean, reliable supply of water is basic to human health and limited on some [tribal] Reservations.”

While the coronavirus pandemic has brought starkly home the necessity of having access

to safe water sources as a matter of life or death, the Black Lives Matter movement has at the same time highlighted the existence of institutional barriers to basic rights most Americans take for granted. The lack of access to clean and safe water on reservations reflects historical inequalities.

In response to this blatant inequality, the Water & Tribes Initiative (WTI) has launched an effort to raise awareness and understanding about the lack of adequate water and sanitation facilities in Native American communities in the Colorado River Basin, and to engage leaders to provide universal access to clean water on the tribal reservations in the Basin. Working with a broad-based team of tribal and other experts, WTI is:

- Conducting research to collect and provide data on lack of access, the social and health impacts of not having clean water, barriers that have prevented the provision of this service, specific projects that can be implemented to

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provide access, and the necessary operational and legislative fixes.

- Developing a policy brief and a messaging campaign to educate citizens, decision-makers, and elected officials about the glaring inequality of access within the basin to an essential service most people take for granted. The policy brief will identify the problems, the public health and economic development implications, and state the ultimate objectives, which will include direct monetary support and removal of barriers to building and maintaining water infrastructure on Indian reservations.
- Developing parallel strategies to seek Congressional support, encourage Executive Branch actions, and engage the philanthropic community.

This work will also provide support for a tribal alternative or “ask” in the negotiation of the

2026 operating guidelines for the Colorado River. In a basin that enjoys vibrant, growing urban areas, productive agriculture, and much economic wealth, the tragedy that many tribal members living on reservations do not have access to safe and clean water, let alone running water, should no longer be treated as outside the scope by water decision-makers. When water security is an overall goal of the Colorado River community, access to running water must be part of the equation.

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For More Information

The Water & Tribes Initiative was catalyzed in 2018 to enhance the capacity of tribes to advance their needs and interests with respect to water management in the basin, and to advance sustainable water management through collaborative decision-making. The Initiative is guided by a broad-based Leadership Team and funded through in-kind contributions of tribes and many other people as well as funding from the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy and the Walton Family Foundation. For more information, please go to <http://naturalresourcespolicy.org/projects/water-tribes-colorado-river-basin.php>.

Leadership Team

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