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Governor Lewis Statement Regarding Reclamation 24-Month Study and Need for More Action to Protect Colorado River System

On June 14, Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Touton testified before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and made public something that we in the Community had already known, that the Colorado River system as a whole is on the brink of collapse, and that there must be urgent action to prevent a human catastrophe for all water users in the basin. As the entitlement holder of nearly one-quarter of the entire Central Arizona Project, or CAP, supply for the State of Arizona, the Community has been deeply engaged in efforts to stave off this crisis, storing almost 600,000 acre-feet of water in Lake Mead since 2016 in order to raise its elevation by over 10 feet.

Beginning early this year, the early warning signs of this crisis were visible for those of us who were looking, so Commissioner Touton's announcement was not a surprise for us, but rather a hopeful call to action for the Basin State parties to come together as we have in the past and craft a cooperative program of water use reductions that would put 2 million acre-feet back into the system on an annual basis necessary to put us on a road to a more stable system for all. As part of that dialogue, the Community offered to again store all of its unused supplies of CAP water in Lake Mead at reasonable and affordable rates previously negotiated as part of the Drought Contingency Plan. We made our offer as part of an effort to help lead to a cooperative dialogue by all parties, knowing full well that our water supplies had a much higher value to us if we simply continued to store them underground in Arizona as had been our practice prior to 2016. We are fortunate to have very significant water supplies that are available for system conservation, and our offer made it possible for Arizona to meaningfully commit to substantial water use reductions as part of a Basin State dialogue to develop a cooperative plan.

Unfortunately, the Community has been shocked and disappointed to see the complete lack of progress in reaching the kind of cooperative basin-wide plan necessary to save the Colorado River system. We are not alone in seeing this lack of progress. As John Entsminger, the General Manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority has noted in his own recent letter to the federal government, the self-interested profiteering proposals from some, the self-interested leasing proposals of others, and the lack of commitment by certain basin states leaves our region in a state of disarray as we confront one of the most significant natural disasters in our collective history.

As it became apparent to the Community that self-interest was driving the decisions of others on the system, we gradually reached the point where we simply had to take a step back from our prior position of leadership on Colorado River issues and re-evaluate our strategy of seeking to help save Lake Mead by contributing our water resources to the solution, and encouraging others to do the same. At this point, as a result of that re-evaluation, we are on a path to once again

store our water supplies underground in Arizona, as nearly every other CAP water user has been doing for years, rather than contributing them to system conservation programs for Lake Mead. We are aware that this approach will have a very significant impact on the ability of the State of Arizona to make any meaningful commitment to water reductions in the basin state discussions, but we cannot continue to put the interests of all others above our own when no other parties seem committed to the common goal of a cooperative basin-wide agreement. While we are likely to face even more substantial reductions in the future as a result of this approach, the value of the water we store will be substantially higher than the value of system conservation, and it appears that that is the only thing that matters at this point to other water users in the system. We can only hope that as this crisis deepens, the stark reality of the crisis will become sufficiently apparent to awaken the cooperative attitudes necessary to make a basin-wide agreement possible. Mr. Entsminger listed a number of very important ideas that could serve as the basis for a new approach to our common problem and we are hopeful that others will agree.

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Gila River Indian Community located on 372,000 acres in south-central Arizona and home to the indigenous O'odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) people. The Tribe is comprised of seven districts, the administrative offices and departments are located in Sacaton, and serve the people throughout these seven community districts. 100% of its profits from gaming and 17 other Enterprises are utilized by the community providing services and opportunities to achieve the highest quality of life.