

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
Interior Region 8: Lower Colorado Basin

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

GSC Farm – Queen Creek Water Transfer Project, Arizona
Interior Region 8: Lower Colorado Basin

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Introduction and Background

The United States (U.S.) Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Interior Region 8: Lower Colorado Basin, has issued a Final Environmental Assessment (EA) that analyzes the environmental impacts of, and potential alternatives to the proposed transfer of Arizona fourth priority Colorado River water entitlement (Water Transfer) from GSC Farm, LLC (GSC Farm), located in La Paz County, to Queen Creek, in Maricopa and Pinal counties, Arizona, through the Central Arizona Project (CAP; the Proposed Action or Project). The water transported in the CAP to Queen Creek would be directed to suitable Groundwater Savings Facilities (GSFs) in or in the vicinity of the Queen Creek service area, for Queen Creek to recover and use the water on an annual basis under existing, permitted recovery wells.

Reclamation's purpose and need for preparing the EA is to evaluate GSC Farm's request to assign 2,033.01 acre-feet per year (AFY) of its Arizona fourth priority Colorado River water entitlement to Queen Creek and transfer the water assigned to Queen Creek by changing the point of diversion, place of use, and type of use.

The Secretary has a broad and unique legal role as she manages the lower Colorado River system in accordance with federal law, including the Boulder Canyon Project Act of 1928, the 1963 Decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Arizona versus California*, the 2006 Consolidated Decree of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Arizona versus California*, the Colorado River Basin Project Act of 1968, the Long-Range Operating Criteria, and the Grand Canyon Protection Act of 1992, and other applicable provisions of federal law.

In accordance with its responsibility to manage the lower Colorado River, Reclamation, on behalf of the Secretary, evaluated the request. An approval of the request would require Reclamation to:

- execute the partial assignment and transfer of Arizona fourth priority Colorado River water entitlement between GSC Farm and Queen Creek,
- execute a Colorado River water delivery contract between the U.S. and Queen Creek,
- amend the existing Colorado River water delivery contract between GSC Farm and the U.S. to reduce GSC Farm's Arizona fourth priority Colorado River water entitlement, and
- execute an 8.17 Wheeling Contract with Queen Creek to wheel the transferred fourth priority Arizona Colorado River water entitlement to Queen Creek through the CAP.

These federal actions are common to all action alternatives considered in the Final EA.

Additional information is provided in the Final EA, which is incorporated by reference.

Public Involvement/Public Comment

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act's purpose and Reclamation's regulations and policy, Reclamation solicited input from the public on the Proposed Action to assist in identifying key issues and defining the scope of the EA. A public notice soliciting comments was emailed to 972 individuals, published online, and published in three papers initiating a 30-day scoping period on August 25, 2021. The scoping period closed on September 24, 2021. A total of 132 comment letters were received during the scoping period.

On March 15, 2022, a draft EA was prepared and published for public review and comment for a 30-day public comment period. A notice of availability was emailed to 818 individuals or agencies, and postcards were mailed to 48 recipients. Information was also made available on two websites. A total of six comment letters were received during the comment period for the draft EA. Substantive comments were addressed in the Final EA.

The Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action (Selected Alternative), Reclamation would approve: (1) the partial assignment and transfer of 2,033.01 AFY of Arizona fourth priority Colorado River water between GSC Farm and Queen Creek; (2) a Colorado River water delivery contract between the U.S. and Queen Creek for diversion and consumptive use of 2,033.01 AFY of Arizona fourth priority Colorado River water; (3) an amendment of the existing GSC Contract to reduce GSC Farm's Arizona fourth priority Colorado River water entitlement to 69.93 AFY of diversion and change the authorized use from irrigation to domestic use; and (4) an 8.17 Wheeling Contract with Queen Creek to wheel the 2,033.01 AFY to Queen Creek through the CAP.

Summary of Impacts

Reclamation's analysis in the EA determined that there would be limited impacts resulting from the Proposed Action. The following issues were addressed in the EA and have been taken into consideration in Reclamation's determination of whether a Finding of No Significant Impact is appropriate, or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) should be prepared.

- 1) Air Quality - The fallowing of agricultural land may temporarily increase land surface exposed to wind erosion but would be offset by the reduction in air emissions from agricultural activities.
- 2) Groundwater - The Proposed Action would increase groundwater storage in the Queen Creek area and also decrease water infiltration on the GSC Farm parcels that are retired from farming.

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- 3) Public Health and Safety - The Proposed Action is not expected to have any demonstrable or measurable effect on public health and safety at the GSC Farm property or on the facilities and operations of the infrastructure systems used to deliver the transferred water to Queen Creek. No new infrastructure would be constructed under either action alternative, and no releases of hazardous materials would be expected to occur.
 - 4) Land Use - Proposed future land use on GSC Farm property is consistent with the La Paz County Comprehensive Plan.
 - 5) Visual Resources - The fallowing of agricultural land would result in minor impacts to visual resources around GSC Farm property.
 - 6) Global Climate Change - Under the Proposed Action, there would be a reduction in emissions from agricultural activities which would be offset by the emissions required to transport water to the GSFs.
 - 7) Cultural and Historic Resources - The Proposed Action will not have any impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. No new infrastructure would be constructed, and the fallowing of lands would not result in any adverse effects to cultural resources.
 - 8) Indian Trust Assets - The Proposed Action will not impact Indian Trust Assets. Native American water rights and entitlements that are legal interests in property held in trust by the U.S. for tribes or individuals would not be affected by any of the alternatives considered in this EA. No other Indian Trust Assets were identified that could potentially be affected by the Proposed Action.
 - 9) Recreation - The average monthly flow reduction below Parker Dam Of 3.95 cubic feet per second is not expected to affect recreation.
 - 10) Surface Water Quality and Quantity - The Proposed Action would result in negligible to minor impacts to flow below Parker Dam. This reduction is within the normal operations of Parker Dam. Any reduction in pollutant discharge from the fallowing of land is expected to be negligible.
 - 11) Hydroelectric Power - The Proposed Action may result in negligible to minor impacts to power production but is within the operational uncertainties for any given year.
 - 12) Vegetation/Invasive Species - The fallowing of agricultural fields may allow the spread of invasive species but is not expected to result in significant impacts.
 - 13) Biological Resources - As described in the Final EA, the Proposed Action is expected to have negligible to minor adverse affects to species listed or proposed to be listed on the list of endangered or threatened species and on designated critical habitat for these species. The reduction in water deliveries resulting from the Proposed Action would be within existing reduction in flow coverage under the Endangered Species Act for the Lower Colorado River Multi-Species Conservation Program.
 - 14) Socioeconomic Resources - The Proposed Action would not have a significant social or economic effect on Mohave, La Paz, or Yuma counties in Arizona or Riverside County in California.

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- 15) Prime Farmlands - The Proposed Action would result in approximately 479 acres of prime farmland being taken out of production. This constitutes 0.4 percent of prime farmland in La Paz County and would not result in significant impacts.
 - 16) Environmental Justice - The Proposed Action will not have disproportionate high and adverse effects on low income or minority populations, as defined in Executive Order 12898, that result from implementation of the Proposed Action.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon the analysis presented in the Final EA for the GSC Farm – Queen Creek Water Transfer Project, Reclamation has determined that the Proposed Action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not warranted.