

## **Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee Joins Historic Agreement Between Upper Basin Tribes and States of the Colorado River**

At a historic meeting on April 22, 2024, the Ute Tribe Business Committee participated in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Upper Basin Tribes (Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Jicarilla Apache Tribe, Navajo Nation, and the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah) and the Upper Division States (Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico) of the Upper Basin of the Colorado River. The MOU represents a government-to-government agreement for the exchange of information and collaboration regarding critical issues impacting the Colorado River, including Indian reserved water rights.



**Business Committee Chairman Julius T. Murray, III, signing the Memorandum of Agreement between the Upper Basin Tribes and Upper Division States of the Colorado River.**

Over a year ago, leadership from the Upper Basin Tribes began regular meetings with the Upper Division States through the Upper Colorado River Commission (UCRC). The UCRC is an interstate water administrative agency approved by Congress with Commissioners appointed by the respective states and a federal representative. Its role is to ensure the appropriate allocation of water from the Colorado River to the Upper Division States. The MOU creates a formal structure for Tribal leadership to continue regular meetings with the State Commissioners, which for the first time has resulted in Tribes' timely access to information related to the administration and management of the Colorado River. This includes information on the current negotiations occurring between the states of the Colorado River and the Bureau of Reclamation that is



intended to address the current crisis resulting in a diminishing water supply in the Colorado River and to produce new guidelines for managing the Colorado River.



Business Committee Members with other Upper Basin Tribal Leaders and Upper Colorado River Commissioners

Upper Basin Tribes are entitled to about 25% of the water rights in the Upper Colorado River Basin. The Ute Indian Tribe has one of the largest quantities of Indian reserved water rights in the Upper Colorado River. A top priority for the Business Committee is to resolve remaining issues related to the Tribe's ability to fully develop and use its Indian reserved water. The MOU is a first step in changing the status quo of excluding Tribes for participating in meaningful discussions about the operation of the Colorado River. The State Commissioners acknowledge the critical need to support Tribal Nations in the development of their Indian water rights.

On April 23, 2024, in the mountains of the Jicarilla Apache Nation, the Tribal leadership continued their meeting with the Commissioners to immediately begin advancing important Tribal goals that are outlined in a "Framework" created by the parties for further discussions. This includes respecting existing settlements and acknowledging the need to complete the settlement of Tribal Indian water rights; exploring mechanisms to allow Tribes to benefit from their undeveloped water and to permanently protect Tribal water rights for future development; and supporting a permanent, structural mechanism for Tribes to exercise their sovereignty and self-determination by participating directly in Colorado River decision-making.

Members of the Business Committee candidly expressed the concerns of the Ute Indian Tribe with the historical struggle against the State and Federal Governments to be able to fully develop and use the Tribal water. Chairman Julius T. Murray, III, expressed frustration that the Ute Indian Tribe does not have a seat on the Upper Colorado River Commission as an equal sovereign that would allow the Ute Indian Tribe to participate in the decisions that affect the management of the Upper Colorado River, and that the State of Utah and the Federal Government have not recognized the Tribe's agreement quantifying its Indian water rights. Chairman Murray informed the participants that the Ute Indian Tribe will continue to fight for its water rights. Other Business Committee members spoke up and expressed their concerns, including the historical and good faith efforts of the Ute Indian Tribe to resolve its Indian water issues and the importance of water to the life of the Tribe, including its value in cultural and spiritual ceremonies; the need to keep water in the Upper Basin so that Tribes can finally develop their water rights and improve their reservations; the need to recognize that every Tribe and reservation is different and should be treated accordingly; and the value of the Tribes and States working together to control the Colorado River in the Upper Basin.





Business Committee Chairman Julius T. Murray, III, addressing the Upper Basin Tribes and Upper Division State Representatives