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Strategic water deliveries return to the Colorado River Delta

Continued binational cooperation and new infrastructure benefit sustainable Colorado River management for nature and people in the Delta region

(May 21, 2024) – On March 21, water began flowing again into the dry Colorado River Delta, as part of an ongoing program of strategic deliveries for the sustainable management and restoration of this important region. The water flows are sanctioned under the bi-national agreement Minute 323, and implemented through the U.S. and Mexican sections of the International Boundary and Water Commission with the support of the Raise the River alliance of U.S. and Mexico-based conservation organizations.

> **"***We applaud the leadership and vision of water managers and state and federal officials in the United States and Mexico in the implementation of the Minute 323 Agreement, which provides a more secure water future for Colorado River water users and supports the restoration of the Colorado River Delta," stated Jennifer Pitt, Colorado River Program Director, National Audubon Society, and Co-Chair, Raise the River Steering Committee. "Binational collaboration is improving the Colorado River Delta's health, sustaining the culture and livelihood of the residents of this region, and reviving the diversity of birds and wildlife."*

The combined pressures of climate change and overallocation have diminished the natural flows of the Colorado River into its Delta region. Members of the Raise the River coalition of conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an active role in the implementation and monitoring of water deliveries, as specified and required under the binational agreement, Minute 323. These organizations include the National Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, Pronatura Noroeste, The Redford Center, Restauremos el Colorado, and Sonoran Institute, which have been working

collaboratively for more than ten years to moderate the impacts of these water shortages on people and nature.

NEW DELIVERY ACCESS POINT

To improve efficiencies in the water flows, a new water delivery access point was constructed in Vado Cebollero, located in the Mexicali Valley in northern Baja, Mexico. Completed on May 11, the smart gate was placed into operation on May 20 after an initial testing phase was completed. This infrastructure project was led by Restauremos el Colorado, affirming Raise the River's support for Minute 323 and demonstrating our coalition's role in its ongoing implementation.

The new delivery point is designed to deliver Colorado River water in irrigation canals into the Colorado River channel where water levels are low. Located ~4 kilometers upstream from Chausse, it expands the benefits for the ecosystem by increasing the potential restoration habitat area. This can increase the green areas in the region which contribute to moderating temperatures and enhancing its ability to adapt to climate change.

The gate will increase the precision of deliveries, decrease monitoring costs, and improve the reliability of the environmental water supply. The eventual goal of this infrastructure project is to provide more water for nature through the savings realized by these efficiencies.

THE 2024 WATER DELIVERIES

The 2024 program of water deliveries is planned to extend for 197 days until October 3, providing an inflow of 24,629 acre-ft (30.38 hm3) of water downstream into the long-depleted Colorado River Delta. Similar programs were implemented in 2021 and 2022, with tactical management designed to maximize the water's impact. The 2024 water flows will be at their highest levels between June 10 to July 1, amplifying the recreational opportunities for local community members as they support the region's wildlife habitats during the most oppressive seasonal temperatures.

As with the prior water delivery programs under Minute 323, water will be delivered to the river corridor in the central delta via existing irrigation canals in the Mexicali Valley that distribute Colorado River water to Mexicali's farmers. The Colorado River's water is diverted into this canal system just south of the United States – Mexico border, into the new delivery access point. Once there, it flows down the canals to specific locations where the Raise the River coalition partners have developed successful restoration sites, and where these programmed releases of water can benefit the habitats and the wildlife that use them.

IMPORTANCE OF BINATIONAL COOPERATION

These water releases for the environment are implemented under Minute 323, the binational treaty agreement negotiated between the U.S. and Mexico federal governments in September 2017. The treaty and this historic accord define how the two countries share Colorado River water through 2026 amidst

growing pressures on water resources. It is part of a larger Colorado River policy framework that provides multiple benefits for water users on both sides of the border.

The United States and Mexico are providing 2/3 of the total water committed (140,000 acre-feet or 173 mcm over 9 years) and the Raise the River coalition of NGOs is providing 1/3 of the water (a total of 70,000 acre-feet or 86 mcm, over 9 years). Raise the River's role in the participation and implementation of Minute 323 includes the following components; (1) The member NGOs are active partners in the Agreement; (2) Delta restoration is a significant component of the Agreement, demonstrating the importance of the onsite activities of the Raise the River coalition members; and (3) Minute 323 defines the role of the NGOs in an explicit manner, based on the proven success and the NGO leadership role in the implementation of Minute 319.

The binational cooperation on the Colorado River is fundamental to future water security for Colorado River water users, especially in the face of increasing impacts of climate change and reduced water throughout the Colorado River basin. With benefits balanced to both the US and Mexico, this advance planning contributes to greater certainty during times of shortages and a more stable overall planning environment.

Through continued collaboration, cooperation, and the participation of each of the various stakeholders in this region, these modest Minute 323 environmental flows can not only help provide water for the birds and other wildlife that depend on the Colorado River in its delta but also offer substantial benefits for the people in the region.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

With climate change amplifying the impacts of overuse and overallocation of the Colorado River, collaborative water management is vital to increase the resilience and sustainability of this essential resource. Raise the River is working with Mexico's national water authority, CONAGUA, and Mexicali Valley agricultural water users to share opportunities for more efficient water use and conservation through a series of ongoing workshops. The strong, developing relationship with the region's agricultural community has been one of the most important developments of the alliance in recent years.

Additionally, Raise the River and its coalition members have active community engagement programs within the Mexicali Valley that offer environmental education and provide recreational opportunities in the newly restored green areas.

Raise the River is committed to continuing its work to bring water and life back to the Colorado River Delta. Its integral participation in the 2024 program of strategic water releases is an important part of its ecosystem restoration efforts, which help combat the impacts of climate change and water scarcity that are projected to only intensify in the coming years.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

1. **Background Information on Raise the River,** including the binational agreements pertaining to the Colorado River and reported results achieved to date from managed restoration projects.
2. **Selection of Photos**
3. **Spokespersons:** Carlos de la Parra for Alianza Revive el Rio Colorado, and Jennifer Pitt for Raise the River

Raise the River is a unique partnership of six United States and Mexico non-governmental organizations working to revive the Colorado River Delta through activities that support environmental restoration for the benefit of the people and the enhancement of wildlife in the Delta. Members include: The Nature Conservancy, National Audubon Society, Pronatura Noroeste, the Redford Center, Restauremos El Colorado, and the Sonoran Institute. The coalition has worked with policymakers, water agencies, and governmental representatives from the U.S. and Mexico since 2012 to cooperatively create historic change for the Colorado River Delta. The Raise the River coalition is also known to as *Alianza Revive el Río Colorado* in Spanish communications and within Mexico.

To learn more about Raise the River, visit www.raisetheriver.org.

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