Who Gets the Water?

How cooperation and conflict shape a shared river

WG.C.4.4 "Evaluate how the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the control and management of territory and resources."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline actions the two countries take together, circle competing demands for water, and mark one sentence about upstream control and one sentence about joint management.

Sharing the Colorado River

1 At the U.S.-Mexico border, the Colorado River carries water that farms and cities on both sides need. A 1944 treaty assigns Mexico a yearly share of the river. Upstream, U.S. dams store water, and U.S. users withdraw large amounts. By the time the river reaches Mexico, little water usually flows to its delta, where wetlands once spread toward the Gulf of California. Mexico can claim its treaty share, but that promise alone does not restore the delta or settle how both countries should handle a long drought. Control of the river depends on more than the location of the border.

2 Dry years sharpen disputes over who must cut back. U.S. water users worry about losing supplies for crops and homes; Mexican farmers depend on predictable deliveries, too. If each country insisted only on its legal share, shrinking reservoirs would still threaten both. Instead, the two governments use a joint agency, the International Boundary and Water Commission, to negotiate detailed agreements called *minutes*. In 2017, Minute 323 set rules for Mexico to share in certain shortage reductions and allowed Mexico to store some of its water in Lake Mead. These measures change how water is managed without moving the border.

3 Cooperation also reaches beyond farms and cities. Under Minute 323, the countries committed water for habitat restoration in the Colorado River Delta, where plants and wildlife need river flows. But this effort does not guarantee a full river to the sea every year. Farmers, city residents, and conservation groups can disagree about whether scarce water should grow food, fill taps, or support wetlands. The agreement gives both countries a way to share costs and plan together, while those competing demands keep pressure on future talks. The case shows that control of water depends on both treaty rights and choices made when supplies fall.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does upstream water use affect what Mexico can do with its treaty share? Use evidence from the passage.

2. Why might the shortage rules in Minute 323 help both countries manage the river during a drought?

3. How does allowing Mexico to store some water in Lake Mead change the way the two countries manage the river?

4. A student claims that Minute 323 ended conflicts over Colorado River water. Do you agree? Support your judgment with two details from the passage.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine two neighboring countries share a river during a five-year drought. One has an upstream dam; the other has downstream farms and a wetland. In one paragraph, propose a specific rule for sharing and managing water, then explain who might object, why, and whether your rule would reduce conflict.

ANSWER KEY

Who Gets the Water?

HIGH SCHOOL · WG.C.4.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline actions the two countries take together, circle competing demands for water, and mark one sentence about upstream control and one sentence about joint management. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does upstream water use affect what Mexico can do with its treaty share? Use evidence from the passage.	**U.S. dams store water and U.S. users withdraw large amounts upstream. Although Mexico has a treaty share, little water usually reaches the delta, so the treaty alone cannot restore its wetlands.**
2	Why might the shortage rules in Minute 323 help both countries manage the river during a drought?	**The rules give Mexico a role in certain shortage reductions. Shared rules help both countries plan for shrinking supplies instead of relying only on their legal shares.**
3	How does allowing Mexico to store some water in Lake Mead change the way the two countries manage the river?	**Mexico can store some of its water in a U.S. reservoir through a joint agreement, making water management more flexible across the border.**
4	A student claims that Minute 323 ended conflicts over Colorado River water. Do you agree? Support your judgment with two details from the passage.	**No. The agreement does not guarantee a full river to the sea every year, and farmers, city residents, and conservation groups still disagree about how to use scarce water.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The countries should measure the river each month and agree to reduce withdrawals by the same percentage when its flow falls below a set level. The upstream country would release enough water to keep the downstream wetland from drying out completely. Upstream farmers might object because they would have less water during the growing season. Downstream farmers might also want more than the rule provides. Public measurements and a rule agreed on in advance could reduce arguments about whether either country is taking too much, although shortages would still cause hardship.

Accept other evidence-based judgments in question 4 if they acknowledge both the agreement's benefits and its limits. For Your Turn, look for a workable sharing rule, an identified source of conflict, and a reasoned evaluation of the rule.