

Lakes Mead, Powell could be dry by 2021

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Laura Rauch / The Associated Press The reduction in water levels because of drought on Lake Mead is made evident by the white ring seen around the shore at Hoover Dam in Boulder City, Nev., in July 2006.

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PHOENIX – Climate changes and a growing population could conspire to dry up Lake Mead and Lake Powell – two of the largest manmade reservoirs in the country and key water sources for Southwestern states – within 13 years, scientists warn.

Researchers at San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography said last month that there's a 50 percent chance that the lakes will dry up by 2021 and a 10 percent chance that they will run out of usable water by 2013.

"We were surprised that it was so soon," said climate scientist David Pierce, co-author of a new Scripps study that detailed the findings.

The study also found that if current conditions persist, there's a 50 percent chance that the reservoirs no longer will be able to generate hydropower by 2017.

Lake Mead, on the Arizona-Nevada line, and Lake Powell, on the Arizona-Utah line, have been hit hard by an ongoing drought in the region and currently are half-full. Both lakes were created by dams built on the Colorado River, which provides water for about 27 million people in seven states.

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The Scripps study made a big splash in and around the thirsty and fast-growing Las Vegas area, where about 2 million residents and almost 40 million people per year depend on the Lake Mead reservoir and the Colorado River.

Ninety percent of the region's water comes from the river, and officials are committed to not letting the reservoir run dry, said Scott Huntley, spokesman for the regional Southern Nevada Water Authority in Las Vegas.

He pointed to an agreement signed in December by the seven states and Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to conserve and share scarce water if the Colorado River drought continues.

"Really, the main underpinning of this is not just supply side, but also demand side," Huntley said.

"First, we continue to monitor the lake levels to determine if states need to come back together for more dramatic and drastic measures," he said. "Second, we diversify our water sources. Third, of course, is continuing our community's efforts to conserve."

The pact signed in December triggers reductions in river-water deliveries to states if the level of Lake Mead drops to 1,075 feet above sea level, and calls for states to create agreements for further restrictions if the level drops to 1,025 feet. The current lake level is 1,117 feet.

Larry Dozier, deputy general manager at the Central Arizona Project – which supplies Colorado River water to the Phoenix and Tucson areas – called the Scripps study "absurd."

"I think they must have made some pretty outrageous assumptions to come up with some outrageous conclusions," Dozier said.

He said CAP has done its own studies on levels in Lake Mead and Lake Powell and had no scenarios that show the reservoirs drying up.

"You can't get there from here," he said. "You can't make it go dry in that situation using any rational set of assumptions."

Pierce said the conclusions in the study are partially based on a possible reduction in runoff of 20 percent over the next 50 years. He said the 20 percent number was a happy medium based on the projected 10 percent to 30 percent decrease in runoff over the next 50 years, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano said that while CAP studies differ from the Scripps study, she agrees with the fundamental point made by Scripps, "which is to say that as our population grows, sustainability is going to require action with respect to water."

"We're still the second-fastest growing state in the country and we still have to be planning on that in terms of sustainability, which is a good concept," Napolitano said.

“Water needs to be a part of that, obviously.”

Launce Rake, spokesman for the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada in Las Vegas, said, “We have a problem.”

“We have declining supply and an increasing population. And on top of that, we use water very inefficiently,” he said.

“We’ve got to start looking at what’s sustainable, both in water use and in growth.”

Rake said issues of water use and growth were often overlooked in a rush to meet the needs of the influential building and development industry.

“Developers have an inordinate amount of clout with our elected leaders,” he said. “They have dictated our growth patterns and our water use for years. That’s got to end.”

– Associated Press Writer Ken Ritter contributed to this report from Las Vegas; Paul Davenport contributed to this report from Phoenix.

Scripps Institution of Oceanography: <http://sio.ucsd.edu>

Southern Nevada Water Authority:
<http://www.snwa.com/html/>

Central Arizona Project: <http://www.cap-az.com>

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