

Researchers: Lake Mead could dry up by 2021

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By Amanda Lee Myers
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PHOENIX – Climate change and a growing demand for water could drain two of the nation's largest manmade reservoirs within 13 years, depriving several Southwestern states of key water sources, scientists warn. Researchers at San Diego's Scripps Institution of Oceanography said Wednesday that there's a 50 percent chance that lakes Mead and Powell will dry up by 2021, and a 10 percent chance the lakes will run out of usable water by 2013. "We were surprised that it was so soon," said climate scientist David Pierce, co-author of the institution's study that detailed the findings. The study, which was released Tuesday, found that if current conditions persist, there's a 50 percent chance the reservoirs will no longer be able to generate hydropower by 2017. Lake Mead, on the Arizona-Nevada border and the West's largest storage reservoir, and Lake Powell, on the Arizona-Utah border, have been hit hard by a regional drought and 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. Researchers said that if Lake Mead water levels drop below 1,000 feet, Nevada would lose access to all its

river allocation, Arizona would lose much of the water that flows through the Central Arizona Project Canal, and power production would cease before the lake level reached bottom. 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," he said. He said his agency's own study of the water levels in the two lakes showed they were in no danger of 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 Scripps study are based partially on an estimated reduction in runoff of 20 percent over the next 50 years. He said that figure was used because it split the difference between the 10 to 30 percent decrease in runoff the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts will occur over the next 50 years. Scott Huntley, a spokesman for the regional Southern Nevada Water Authority in Las Vegas, said 90 percent of the region's water comes from the Colorado River, and that government officials are committed to not letting the Lake Mead reservoir dry up. 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 December agreement established triggers that would reduce river water deliveries to states if Lake Mead's water level falls to 1,075 feet above sea level. It also 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.

Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano said that while the Scripps findings differ from the Central Arizona Project's, 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, a spokesman for the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada in Las Vegas, said the issues of water usage and population growth are 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 writers Paul Davenport in Phoenix and Ken Ritter in Las Vegas

contributed to this report.—On the Net: 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/>