

Opinion | The thirsty West's dreaded water crisis is here

[David Von Drehle](#)



Lake Mead just above the Hoover Dam in Nevada last month. (Kyle Grillot/Bloomberg)

The Achilles' heel, the hard ceiling on Western ambitions, was water, and everyone knew it.

From the earliest days, Western wisdom [held that](#) "whiskey is for drinking, but water is for fighting over." [Water wars](#) erupted almost as soon as the settlers began occupying tribal lands. Water was the golden ticket, the key to

prosperity. But unlike in the East, where reliable rivers just kept rolling, Western water was fickle. It roared and rampaged in certain seasons, and dried up entirely in others.

Everything came down to regular, dependable supply: who had it, who didn't. All the Western miracles dangled on the question of water. Epics of engineering such as the Hoover Dam and the Los Angeles aqueducts. Vaulting visions such as modern Phoenix and Las Vegas. Miracles of agriculture such as the [Central Valley](#) of California.

Everyone knew deep down that the taming, steering and storing of water could go only so far before there was no longer enough to go around.

Virtually the entire West is tapped out. [Extreme drought](#) conditions prevail in all or parts of at least seven states. Wildfires are epidemic. [Lake Mead](#), the largest reservoir in the United States, is [drying up](#), with [less water](#) in it than at any time since its creation in the 1930s.

The implications are staggering. An estimated [25 million people](#), plus their businesses and farms, rely on water from Lake Mead, fed primarily by the Colorado River. Moreover, many of them rely on power from the Hoover Dam, where reservoir water drives the generators. The dam's performance is now severely threatened by the falling water supply.

The story is the same at [Lake Powell](#) upriver. Plans are underway to release water from upstream reservoirs to address the crisis — but this is a matter of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Those reservoirs support other millions of Westerners, their commerce and their agriculture.

The long-dreaded future of insufficient water is here. Action must be taken on a gargantuan scale and an emergency timetable. The risk is great that Westerners will snarl this up in a debate about climate and environmentalism. But left or right, red or blue, thirsty is thirsty.

At the heart of the problem is a lie — or call it, more forgivingly, a convenient fiction. Long ago, when the West was still mostly a dream, the states in the Colorado River watershed [formed a compact](#) to share the river. (Similar deals have been struck along lesser rivers of the West.) To ease negotiations, the states essentially pretended that the Colorado carries a lot more water than it does.

Each year, the compact has divvied up roughly half a trillion to a trillion gallons more than the river [actually carries](#) — and in the midst of this long drought, the overage is even greater. That was fine when demand was smaller. But as the region took off, farsighted experts [predicted](#) the bill would eventually come due. Now it has.

There is no simple single solution. Rather than fight over

whose ox will be gored, all the oxen need to be gored at once. Agriculture in the West must speed up conversion to high-efficiency irrigation. And cultivation of four big [water-intensive crops](#) — alfalfa, cotton, rice and almonds — may need to move to places where water is more plentiful.

Western coastal cities must ramp up investment in desalination plants to significantly increase the usable water they draw from the Pacific. Municipal water systems must follow the example set by Orange County, Calif., where cutting-edge water recycling technology will soon be producing [130 million gallons per day](#). Homeowners and businesses must use less water. Lawns must shrink and landscaping come to reflect the reality of an arid climate.

All these things can be done, but they must happen far more quickly and on a larger scale. One hopeful sign: A once-controversial measure to allow owners of water rights to cut the amount they use without surrendering their future claims to the savings [passed](#) the Arizona legislature this year without a single no vote.

We're not seeing a lot of bipartisanship these days. However: Thirsty is thirsty.

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