



The Whitsett Intake on the Colorado River at Parker, Ariz.

The West has a dangerous lack of water and will

The management strategy to slow the draining of Lake Mead does not appear to be working.

Todd Fitchette | Jun 18, 2021

The attention drawn to Lake Mead near Las Vegas, Nev., is understandable and perplexing at the same time. In late May the lake elevation dipped below 1,075 feet, one of several milestones agreed to in negotiations between the states that rely upon the lake.

The management strategy to slow the draining of the massive reservoir does not appear to be working.

Though the reservoir is technically below the level for Tier 1 restrictions to be implemented, the Bureau of Reclamation won't implement those restrictions until 2022. Until then, water can leave Lake Mead under Tier 0 restriction levels. This means minor cutbacks in Arizona and Nevada, but business as usual for California.

California can continue withdrawing its full allocation until the lake reaches 1,045 feet, at which time agreed-to cutbacks will trim California's allotment by 200,000-acre feet per year. California has priority rights to the Colorado River above those of the other states.

One cannot blame Metropolitan Water District of Southern California for its increased pumping from its station at Parker, Ariz. When the California Department of Water Resources cut promised deliveries to the 29 water agencies in line for northern California water to just 5% of full allocations, MWD had to go somewhere to quench its thirst.

As Western water woes go from bad to worse, and publications like the Arizona Republic report at length on the worsening conditions, one might ask when the political will to address the loss of water to tens of millions of people in the West will become noticeable.

Climate scientists like Daniel Swain at UCLA suggest our changing climate will make things worse for water managers as temperatures warm and the ability to fill our reservoirs disappears with the lack of snow in places like the Sierra Nevada and along the Colorado River system.

In one of a set of interesting webinars hosted by the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Division at <https://tinyurl.com/2spr88zv> , Swain suggests a widening swing of the water pendulum from want to plenty. We've seen this in relatively short spans where the Western drought of 2014 through 2016 was followed in early 2017 by so much water that Oroville Dam in northern California came precariously close to catastrophic failure when the lake filled in hours because of epic rainfall in the Feather River watershed. Now the lake is back to being almost empty.

The West's water woes should not surprise anyone and should be the focus of attention unlike mankind saw in previous generations with the large public projects that built dams named Hoover, Glen Canyon and Shasta. Public pressure should be hot, much like the mid-June temperatures in the Southwest that threatened to set all-time records in Las Vegas, Phoenix and Yuma.

There will be plenty pain to go around, except sadly for the politicians who got us here. History suggests they'll find a soft landing elsewhere to spread their mayhem.

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