

# These Four States Are in Denial Over a Looming Water Crisis

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By Sammy Roth

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Lake Mead is two-thirds empty. Lake Powell is [even emptier](#).

Not for the first time, the seven Western states that rely on the Colorado River are fighting over how to keep these reservoirs from crashing — an event that could spur water shortages from Denver to Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

The tens of millions of people who rely on the Colorado River have weathered such crises before, even amid a stubborn [quarter-century megadrought](#) fueled by climate change. The states have always struck deals to use less water, overcoming their political differences to avert “dead pool” at Mead and Powell, meaning that water could no longer flow downstream.

This time, a deal may not be possible. And it’s clear who’s to blame.

Not the farmers who grow alfalfa and other feed for animals, despite the fact that they use [one-third of all water](#) in the Colorado River basin. Not California, even though the Golden State uses more river water than any of its neighbors. Not even the Trump administration, which has done a lousy job pressing the states to compromise.

No, the Upper Basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming have emerged as the main obstacles to a fair deal. They've gummed up negotiations by refusing to accept mandatory cuts of any amount — unlike the Lower Basin states, which have spent years slashing water use.

Upper Basin leaders have long harbored ambitions of using [more water](#) to fuel economic development, especially in cities. "There's this notion of keeping the dream of growth alive," said John Fleck, a researcher at the University of New Mexico. "It's difficult for people to reckon with the reality that they can't keep that dream alive anymore."

Federal officials have set a Feb. 14 deadline for the seven states to reach consensus, although negotiators [blew past a November deadline](#) with no consequence. The real cutoff is the end of 2026, when longstanding rules for assigning cuts to avoid shortages will expire.

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[Low snowpack levels](#) across the Western United States this winter are raising the stakes. In some ways, though, the conflict is a century in the making.

Since 1922, the states have divvied up water under the

Colorado River Compact, which gave 7.5 million acre-feet annually to the Lower Basin and 7.5 million acre-feet to the Upper Basin. Most water originates as Rocky Mountain snowmelt before flowing downstream to Lake Powell near the Utah-Arizona border. Once released from Powell, it flows through the Grand Canyon to Lake Mead, near Las Vegas.

But even though the two groups of states agreed to split the water evenly, Los Angeles and Phoenix grew bigger and faster than Denver and Salt Lake City, gobbling up more water. Lower Basin farmers and ranchers, too, used far more water than their Upper Basin counterparts — especially growers in California's Imperial Valley, who staked out some of the river's oldest and thus highest-priority water rights.

Global warming had other plans, too. There was never as much water in the river as negotiators assumed even back in 1922 — a fact that scientists knew at the time. The states spent decades outrunning that original sin by finding creative ways to conserve water when drought struck. But deal-making was easier when the river averaged, say, 13 million acre-feet. Over the past six years, as the effects of burning fossil fuels have mounted, flows [averaged](#) just 10.8 million acre-feet. That means the states will need to make much deeper cuts.

So far, no luck. The Upper and Lower Basins have spent several years at fierce loggerheads, with some negotiators

growing vitriolic. State officials are still talking, most recently at a [Jan. 30 meeting](#) convened by Interior Secretary Doug Burgum. But after two decades of collaborative problem-solving, longtime observers say they've never seen so much animosity.

Lower Basin officials largely blame Colorado, the de facto leader of the Upper Basin. They say Colorado won't budge from what they consider the extreme legal position that the Upper Basin bears no responsibility for delivering water downstream from Powell to Mead for the Lower Basin's use. They also fault Colorado for demanding that mandatory cuts fall entirely on the Lower Basin.

Upper Basin officials tell a different story. They insist that California and Arizona have been overconsuming water — and by their reading of the compact, that means it's not their job to keep replenishing the Lower Basin's savings account at Lake Mead. They also say it would be unfair to force them to cut back when California and Arizona are the real water hogs.

On the one hand, the numbers don't lie: The Lower Basin states used nearly [6.1 million acre-feet](#) in 2024, compared with the Upper Basin's nearly [4.5 million](#), according to the federal government. The Imperial Irrigation District — which supplies farmers who [grow](#) alfalfa, broccoli, onions and other crops — used more water than the entire state of Colorado.

On the other hand, the Lower Basin has done far more to cut back than the Upper Basin. Los Angeles and Las Vegas residents have [torn out grass lawns](#) en masse; Vegas has [water cops](#) to police excessive water use by sprinkler systems. Farmers in [Arizona](#) and [California](#) are leaving fields dry, sometimes aided by federal incentive programs. California is investing in expensive [wastewater recycling](#) to reduce its dependence on imported water.

Mr. Fleck [projected](#) that the Lower Basin's Colorado River consumption in 2025 would be its lowest since 1983. Imperial's consumption would be its lowest since [at least 1941](#).

California, Arizona and Nevada still waste [plenty of water](#), but they're prepared to go further. They've told the Upper Basin that as part of a post-2026 deal, they're [willing to reduce consumption](#) by an additional 1.25 million acre-feet of water — but only if the Upper Basin shares the pain of further cuts during especially dry years.

Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming do not want to share the pain — at least not through mandatory cuts. They say they already cut back voluntarily during drought years, although [independent experts are skeptical](#). They also say the Lower Basin states use [more water than federal data show](#) — something like 10 million acre-feet.

When I asked Becky Mitchell, Colorado's lead negotiator, if her state plans to keep growing, she responded with an alarming comparison to the Lower Basin, musing that the Upper Basin would probably never use 10 million acre-feet. Thank goodness, because that kind of growth would more than bankrupt the Colorado River.

But even as she acknowledged that the Upper Basin states "have to live within hydrology," she suggested they have a right to use more water.

"The compact gave us the protection to grow and develop at our own pace," she said.

In theory, yes. But after more than 100 years, the time for unchecked growth has passed. In an era of climate crisis, we all need to be realistic.

The Upper Basin can keep insisting that the river's challenges are largely the Lower Basin's to solve — most likely [forcing Arizona to sue](#), because the state's junior water rights could be some of the first to get cut in a shortage. Or maybe federal officials will pre-emptively order every state to cut back and dare the Upper Basin to file a lawsuit.

Either way, someone will lose. And if [past is precedent](#), a court case could drag on for a decade or longer. We don't have nearly that much time to prevent catastrophic water

shortages.

That is why the Upper Basin should let go of its thirsty aspirations and accept that the era of Western expansion is over. It's 2026, not 1922.

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