

# Dips in Lake Powell, Colorado River a reminder water supply isn't unlimited

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**CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP)** — The white rings that wrap around two massive lakes in the U.S. West are a stark reminder of how water levels are dropping and a warning that the 40 million people who rely on the Colorado River, including many in Utah, face a much drier future.



Lake Powell – Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, date and location not specified | Photo courtesy of the National Park Service, St. George News

Amid prolonged drought and climate change in a region that's only getting thirstier, when that reckoning will arrive – and how much time remains to prepare for it – is still a guess.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation released [projections](#) Aug. 14 that suggest Lake Powell and Lake Mead will dip 16 feet (5 meters) and 5 feet (1.5 meters), respectively, in January from levels recorded a year earlier. Despite the dip, Lake Mead would stay above the threshold that triggers severe water cuts to cities and farms, giving officials throughout the Southwest more time to prepare for the future when the flow will slow.

The bureau has proposed a [140-mile pipeline between Lake Powell and the Sand Hollow Reservoir](#) to provide Washington County with a second source of water.

"It's at least a couple of decades until we're saying, 'We don't have one more drop for the next person that comes here,'" said Ted Cooke, general manager of Central Arizona Project, the canal system that delivers river water. "But people certainly ought to be aware that water – the importation of a scarce commodity into a desert environment – is expensive and, with climate change, going to get even more expensive."

The Colorado River supplies Arizona, California, Nevada,

Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming and Mexico. Its water pours out of faucets in growing cities like Los Angeles, Denver, Las Vegas and Phoenix and nourishes enough farmland to yield 15% of total U.S. crop output and 13% of livestock production.



A bathtub ring of light minerals delineates the high water mark on Lake Mead at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Thursday, Aug. 13, 2020, near Boulder City, Nevada. | Photo by John Locher, Associated Press, St. George News

Last year, with increasingly less water flowing to Lake Mead and Lake Powell – the two largest man-made reservoirs in the United States – Arizona, California and Nevada agreed to a drought contingency plan that built in voluntary cuts to prevent the reservoirs from dropping to dangerous levels. The other states historically haven't used their full allocation of water and focus on keeping Lake Powell full enough to generate hydropower.

Nevada and Arizona will make those voluntary cuts under the new projections, which they also made last year for the first time. But because neither state is using its full share of water, the impact has been minimal and hasn't trickled down to homes. Mexico also is facing another round of cuts.

"The future of the river is going to be drier than in the past. All the climate models and the current drought suggest that," said Colby Pellegrino, Southern Nevada Water Authority's deputy general manager of resources. "Every sector is going to have to learn how to do more with less."

Since 1990, the population has more than tripled in the Las Vegas area, which gets nearly 90% of its water from the Colorado River. But by treating and recycling almost all water used indoors – for flushing toilets and running dishwashers, for example – and replacing nearly 305,000 square miles (790,000 square kilometers) of grass with desert-friendly landscaping, the area has consumed far less than it's allocated.

Elsewhere, officials are scrambling to find alternative water supplies to sustain growing cities and farms. Agricultural areas can't replicate Las Vegas' turf removal program. And Nevada's ability to restore treated wastewater to Lake Mead, which is about 30 miles (48 kilometers) east of Las Vegas, can't be done in places with less storage capacity, like Southern California, where wastewater runs into the

Pacific Ocean.

Tribes within the Colorado River basin also have at least 785,000 acre-feet of water each year that they have claimed but haven't legally settled, or enough to fill about 3.2 billion average-sized bathtubs, according to a federal study. Arizona pays two tribes for their unused water, relying heavily on it to fulfill the state's obligations in the drought contingency plan. At some point, that arrangement could change as supplies shrink and tribes need more of their share.



FILE – In this Sept. 9, 2011 file photo visitors view the dramatic bend in the Colorado River at the popular Horseshoe Bend in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, in Page, Ariz. | Photo by Ross D. Franklin, Associated Press, St. George News

John Fleck, director of University of New Mexico's Water Resources Program, said that unlike conservation, costs hinder most proposals to bring in new water.

“What you’re seeing is these expensive projects are dying because of this conservation trend,” he said. “They’re just super expensive, and we’re seeing communities successfully conserving without too much trouble. Without them, it doesn’t feel particularly painful.”

Cooke acknowledged the costs of alternative supply projects but said conservation-minded academics like Fleck have a different perspective because they aren’t accountable to customers and constituents.

“We’re working on both of those things – both to reduce consumption and to increase supply – and we don’t have to make a choice between one or the other,” Cooke said.

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