

‘A five-alarm fire’: Western reservoirs that supply California fall to record low levels

By Ian James for The Los Angeles Times

June 25, 2026

Summary

Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the two largest reservoirs in the US, have reached record low levels, highlighting the severity of the water crisis in the Colorado River Basin. The crisis, exacerbated by climate change and overuse, threatens water supplies for 35 million people and 5 million acres of farmland. Negotiations between the seven states dependent on the river are ongoing, with the federal government considering mandatory water cutbacks.

Lake Mead and Lake Powell, the country’s two largest reservoirs, have fallen to their lowest combined levels on record, a grim marker in the deepening water crisis across seven states that depend on the Colorado River.

The two reservoirs are now lower than the previous record in 2023, researchers say.



Photo caption: A 300-by-150-foot American flag was suspended across Hoover Dam in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area on June 30 in honor of the country’s 250th anniversary. (Ethan Miller / Getty Images)

“It’s a hell of a milestone,” said Jack Schmidt, director of Utah State University’s Center for Colorado River Studies. “Really a teaching moment to all of us of the severity of the crisis.”

U.S. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum met with governors of the seven states virtually Tuesday and said his agency will release a plan to deal with water shortages next week. Lake Mead near Las Vegas, the country’s largest reservoir, is 27% full.

Lake Powell on the Utah-Arizona border, the second-largest, is at just 23% of capacity. If it drops 33 more feet, water won’t reach its intakes to [generate hydroelectric power](#).

Schmidt and five other researchers [wrote](#) in a white paper that the new low underscores the urgency of using less water. They predicted the reservoirs will keep setting records every day until snows come and bring the next seasonal pulse of runoff.

It’s unclear whether the strong [El Niño conditions](#) this year might provide some relief. The latest [three-month forecast](#) by the National Weather Service predicts [above-average rainfall](#) along the river and in much of the Southwest through October.

The Colorado River provides water for about [35 million people](#) and 5 million acres of farmland, from the Rocky Mountains to northern Mexico. The water was originally divided among the states in 1922 under an agreement that overpromised what the river could provide.



Photo caption: The remains of a boat sit on a dry shore at Lake Mead National Recreation Area. (Ty O'Neil / Associated Press)

For decades, so much water has been taken that the river seldom meets the sea in Mexico, and its delta, once filled with lush wetlands and forests, has [shriveled to stretches of dry riverbed](#).

In the last 27 years, the river has shrunk dramatically. Research has shown that global warming is [intensifying the extremely dry conditions](#).

Since 2020, the flow of the Colorado has averaged 32% less than during the last century.

This year, the upper portion of the river's watershed in the Rocky Mountains had the [least snow on record](#).

"If you need any more evidence that we have a five-alarm fire, here it is," Schmidt said. "The changes that are going to be necessary to live in this world of reduced runoff are going to be incredibly significant," Schmidt said. "We need to get seven states to agree together, or accept a mandate from the federal government, that major reductions have to be implemented right now."

After the meeting Tuesday, Burgum [said](#) he was grateful to the governors for their "leadership and commitment to finding solutions to address drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin."

The Trump administration is focused on "establishing a new operating framework and continues to work with the states and 30 tribes to get closer to consensus," he said. Negotiators for the seven states have been at an impasse in talks on how to cut water use, with the disagreements pitting three downstream states — California, Arizona and Nevada — against the upstream states of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah and New Mexico. Representatives of California, Arizona and Nevada have offered to make substantial cuts, using about 1.6 million acre-feet less annually over the next two years.

But state officials [have said](#) the Trump administration is leaning toward mandatory cutbacks of up to twice that much per year for those three states — as much as 40% of their combined allotments. That's nearly as much as all the water that flowed from 19 million people's taps across Southern California last year, although it's important to remember that most Colorado River water goes to agriculture: hay, lettuce, broccoli and other crops.

Federal officials seem to be "trying to put some structure in place that pushes the states to try again, maybe with a slightly different playing field, to see if the states can come to some sort of agreement," said Jennifer Pitt, director of the National Audubon Society's Colorado River program.

Reaching a consensus would be the best outcome for all users along the Colorado River, Pitt said, because [a court battle](#) holds tremendous uncertainty.

Over the last five years, cities across Southern California have received nearly one-fourth of their water from the Colorado River.

They've tried to rely on it less, with some success. Those efforts, along with ample water from Northern California, allowed the board of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California last week to accept \$65 million from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in return for leaving as much as 200,000 acre-feet of water in Lake Mead. That water, equivalent to the annual use of about 600,000 typical households, is expected to add about 3 feet to Lake Mead's level, enough to temporarily stave off critically low levels for a few months.

Lake Mead was lower once before, in 2022, but Lake Powell was higher then, so the two combined held more water.

In the last three years, California, Arizona and Nevada have turned to [voluntary water cutbacks](#) and federal [payments to farmers](#) who agree to leave fields dry part of the year.

The Bureau of Reclamation, which manages dams along the river, now [plans to provide an additional \\$100 million](#) for water conservation programs in the four upstream states, paying farmers and ranchers who agree to use less. The saved water will remain in reservoirs, helping to slow their unrelenting decline.