

Again the question about whether Lake Powell is doomed

[Allen Best](#) Allen Best is a Colorado-based journalist who publishes an e-magazine called Big Pivots. Reach him at allen.best@comcast.net or 303.463.8630.

[January 26, 2019](#) by [Allen Best](#)



Glen Canyon Dam was completed in 1963, providing a pool of water in Lake Powell for upper-basin states to ensure deliveries of water to lower-basin states as required by the Colorado River Compact of 1922. Photo/Wikipedia Commons.

Again the question: Too little water in

the future to justify Lake Powell?

by Allen Best

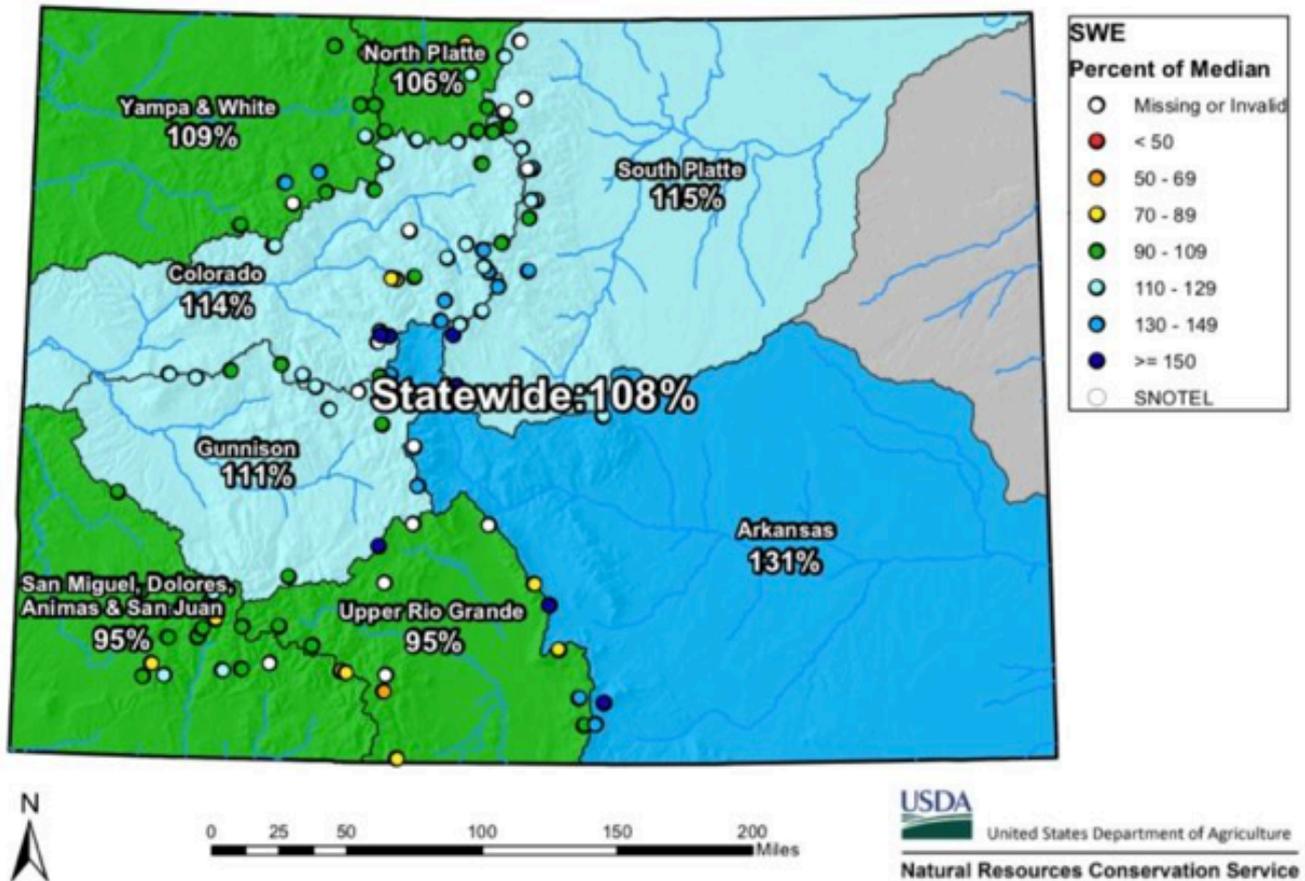
Snow has arrived in the Rocky Mountains. Snotel measurements this week revealed snowpack of 95 percent of average in Colorado, but that amounts to a real winter as compared to the year before.

. "We are thankful for the improved snow conditions this year," reported Telluride Mayor Sean Murphy in his [state-of-the-town address on Jan.18](#), "not only for the positive economic impact, but also for the reduced pressure it places on the San Miguel River."

If this keeps up, the San Miguel will gush with snowmelt in May and June. In Utah, that water will join a Colorado River already engorged with runoff from creeks and rivers originating near Crested Butte, Aspen, Vail, and Winter Park.

Colorado SNOTEL Snow Water Equivalent (SWE) Update Map with Site Data

Current as of Jan 24, 2019



This rush downhill gets halted in Lake Powell, just short of the Grand Canyon. Powell is the second largest reservoir in the United States. The largest, Lake Mead, lies 300 miles downstream, below the canyon.

Those two reservoirs entered the 21st century nearly full. The declines since then can be discerned in the bathtub ring-like white bands on the canyon walls, whose minerals were leached when submerged in water. [The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation reported in mid-January](#) that Mead was at 39 percent of capacity and Powell at 41 percent.

Might just one reservoir suffice instead of two?

Environmentalists have been itching to take down Glen Canyon, the dam that creates Lake Powell, almost since it was completed in 1963. Desert lover Ed Abbey even fashioned a mischievous plot around a fractured dam in his 1975 novel, "The Monkey Wrench Gang."

In recent years, the idea of emptying the reservoir has been discussed with growing seriousness. On Sunday, Jan. 20, the question was posed once more by the [Salt Lake Tribune](#).

"Without a change in how the Colorado River is managed, Lake Powell is headed toward becoming a 'dead pool,' essentially useless as a reservoir while revealing a sandstone wonderland once thought drowned forever by humanity's insatiable desire to bend nature to its will," the paper's Brian Maffly reported.

Maffly sorted through the complicated reasons for concerns about overuse of the Colorado River. A warming, more desiccating climate accompanied by more frequent droughts has caused declining flows from Colorado and other upper-basin states.

Over-consumption has also been a big cause of reservoir declines. Water use of the river is governed by the 1922 Colorado River Compact and other agreements. Upper-basin states use less than two-thirds of their apportionments. California and Arizona use their share—

and all else. Mexico also gets a substantial allocation. It also matters that the river compact fashioned by the seven states in 1922 assumed more water than the river has delivered since then.

“The conversation now is how to do we manage the pain and spread it around so it’s not too devastating to one party,” said Doug Kenney, who leads the Boulder-based [Colorado River Research Group](#).

All seven basin states have been involved in efforts to reduce consumption. Progress has been slow.

One experimental program has cities, primarily, paying ranchers to reduce their legal use of water.

On Colorado’s Western Slope, there’s worry that cities—who have the money—will intentionally or unintentionally shift water use away from rural areas traditionally focused on growing hay for cattle. This would, as the [Crested Butte News](#) pointed out, “change the character of this area of Colorado.”

Jim Pokrandt, a spokesman for the Colorado River Water Conservation District, which represents most of the counties in which ski areas are located, explains the district’s insistence that the water be shared in “voluntary, compensated, and temporary” arrangements. Any

permanent transfers will be opposed, he told the Crested Butte paper.

Climate studies strongly suggest runoff will continue to decline. "Lake Powell is doomed," proclaims Gary Wockner, who leads an advocacy group called the [Save the Colorado](#). "The sooner we accept that inevitability, the sooner we will find a permanent solution," Wockner, who is based in Fort Collins, Colo., told the Salt Lake newspaper.

Nonsense, says Albuquerque-based author John Fleck, a long-time student of the Colorado River. In a post on his website, [inkstain.net](#), Fleck said the Powell-is-doomed thesis is predicated on cherry-picked data.

Fleck, the author of "Water Is for Fighting Over: And Other Myths about Water in the West," said Powell levels have been relatively stable since 2005. Importantly, the reservoir has been used to deliver more than 9.4 million acre-feet of water from the upper-basin states to Lake Mead. "The reservoir that seems to be headed far more inexorably toward disaster is Mead, not Powell," he wrote. Despite the bonus water, Mead has continued to decline.

Jack Schmidt, a hydrologist at Utah State University, told the Colorado River Water Conservation District's annual conference in Grand Junction, Colo., in 2016 that he wasn't convinced decommissioning Glen Canyon Dam can be

justified yet. But, he added then, it's an idea worth talking about.

In story published in the November issue of Planning magazine, I also addressed the question of whether the hydraulic infrastructure created during the 20th century will prove satisfactory for the 21st century climate. You can see the story here: [Powell-Mead story for Planning November 2018 compressed-2](#):