

Lake Powell, a vital reservoir, plunges toward unprecedented low levels as water crisis deepens in US west

Experts say the critical reservoir system is careening toward a breaking point as the US west's climate warms and dries

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Lake Powell, the US's second-largest reservoir, threatens to plunge to unprecedentedly low levels this year after a historically bleak snowpack failed to raise its water level, scientists and water experts have said, adding renewed urgency to stalled talks over how to conserve a water source depended on by tens of millions of people in the US south-west.

The 185-mile Colorado River reservoir currently stands at about 22% of its capacity, or roughly 5.6m acre-feet. Lake Powell fell below that level for a few months three years ago. But those 2023 levels were recorded in the winter, when the reservoir, which straddles the Utah-Arizona border, hits its lowest ebb. Spring runoff carried the level back up to 9.6m acre-feet by June, according to data from the US Bureau of Reclamation.

Not this year. After a [winter of historically low snowpack](#) in the mountains and a heatwave that [broke records across the south-west in March](#), water levels at Lake Powell barely rose this spring at all. Even after supplemental releases from Flaming Gorge Reservoir upstream, it ended the month of June below the annual low it hit the month before, and could keep dropping. Except for those few months in 2023, Lake Powell's water level has not been this low since June of 1965 – two years after US authorities first started filling it.

"What's unique this year is that there was no recovery at all," said Jack Schmidt, the director of [Utah](#) State University's Center for Colorado River Studies. "What we expect to happen is that Lake Powell will go to unprecedented low conditions some time this fall."

"Water management in the Colorado River system is starting to get terribly complicated," he added.

With the spring runoff season passed, the lake's water level is projected to keep dropping for the next eight months. The consequences could be wide-ranging – imperiling hydroelectric power and throwing more uncertainty into an already contentious negotiation over how to divvy up an increasingly unreliable water supply used by 40 million people across seven states, dozens of tribal nations and two countries.

Lake Powell stands at just 37ft above the level at which electricity-generating turbines start to fail, [according to Inc](#). Nearly 6m households and businesses rely on the power generated by Lake Powell's Glen Canyon power plant.

For more than two decades, Lake Powell and its downriver sister, Lake Mead, [have dwindled](#) in capacity, even as the tens of millions of people who rely on them for fresh water have cut back their use. Negotiators from the seven US states with legal rights to water from the Colorado River – California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Wyoming – have so far [failed to make an agreement](#) over how to conserve the region's most important source of surface water. The US Bureau of Reclamation could resolve the impasse by imposing its own plan for cuts as [soon as next month](#).

Now, experts say, the system is careening toward a long-feared breaking point as the US west's climate warms and dries.

"In the 21st century, the ultimate cause of the problem is declining runoff," said Schmidt. "There's less water in the system. It's caused by a warming climate, period."

Facing increasingly dire challenges, many south-western cities are taking increasingly bold action to guarantee alternate water supplies for the future, said Sarah Porter, the director of the Kyl Center for Water Policy at Arizona State University.

"Cities have a whole lot of tools that they're going to deploy," Porter said. "Because cities are going to be differentially impacted by the Colorado River shortage, they've developed a voluntary framework for helping each other out."

Phoenix is one of the most prominent cities whose users can no longer count on the Colorado River to provision its inhabitants or to recharge its depleting groundwater. Like other cities built on the faltering notion that the Colorado River could provide a sustainable water source, Phoenix is now turning to more creative solutions – most notably investing in recycling [effluent from sewage](#) back into drinking water.

In a similarly out-of-the-box solution, the city of San Diego [announced a plan](#) last month to use water surplus from its desalination plant to strike a water deal with Arizona and Nevada. The deal, which has yet to be finalized, would allow those arid states to buy some of San Diego's unused water rights to the Colorado River.

Brad Udall, a water and climate research scientist at Colorado State University, said paying users to get out of the system is exactly what the reservoirs need if authorities ever hope to recharge them.

"There are too many straws in the glass," Udall said. "Rather than having an annual fight over who gets what, let's remove some straws ... One way to do that is the American way – let's buy 'em out."

The Colorado River crisis is perhaps the first time that climate change is “forcing a rethink of 100 years of law and policy and rules and interstate compacts and international treaties around a water source”, Udall said.

“You see climate change impacts across the globe, like big floods, hurricanes – but people pick up the pieces and kind of go back to the way they were living before,” Udall said. “But here, because the flows are so low, we’re going to have to start buying out or cutting off water users, and the rules we have are completely inadequate to the task.”

The gloomiest of predictions have raised fears that the current falling levels could condemn Lake Powell to “deadpool”, a state in which the reservoir drops so low that gravity can no longer carry water releases downstream.

But Schmidt, the Utah State University professor, said such a catastrophe was unlikely. Authorities would intercede to keep that from happening, through a combination of forced cuts and releases from Flaming Gorge.

Still, experts expect Lakes Powell and Mead to remain largely depleted for the foreseeable future, even as they provide less water for the region’s inhabitants.

“We have control over how bad it gets,” said Porter, the Arizona water law expert. “But the only thing we can do to keep it from getting bad is to take less water out.”

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