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Good and bad news for Colo. River Basin



Rafters on the Colorado River near the Utah border.



Conditions in the Upper Colorado River Basin, particularly in Colorado, are OK for the time being, officials said Wednesday during a “state of the river” address in Rifle.

However, the largest of several caveats to that statement falls in the context of the entire Colorado River Basin, specifically the lower basin, where water use continues to outpace supply.

Additionally, good flows and filling reservoirs in the Centennial state and in other areas of the upper basin — a region that includes western Colorado, eastern Utah, a sliver of Arizona and portions of Wyoming and New Mexico — are a sign that drier conditions loom in the future.

The combination of the two could lead to reductions in water usage, Eric Kuhn, general manager of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, said Wednesday.

The statement was not a prediction, Kuhn added, but a call for preparedness.

The cautionary note comes at a peculiar time basinwide.

“So right now ... you’re ... reading a lot of things about what’s going on in Arizona and the drought in California, the lower basin states are using too much water and they’re having to cut back — all of that is true,” Kuhn said. “But we’re kind of in an interesting situation. In Colorado conditions are OK to wet.”

Snowpack for the Upper Colorado River Basin was at 118 percent of average as of May 24, according to provisional SNOTEL data from the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

While the basinwide snowpack is less than the past two years, it is not “too far off normal,” said Nolan Doesken, Colorado state climatologist.

A streamflow forecast from NRCS predicts most of the Upper Colorado River Basin will hover around 100 percent of average May through July. And, Colorado's reservoir storage statewide at the end of April was 112 percent of average.

Operations at two smaller storage reservoirs for the Upper Colorado River Basin, Green Mountain Reservoir in Summit County and Ruedi Reservoir east of Basalt, reflect average conditions, according to Victor Lee, hydrologic engineer for the Bureau of Reclamation's eastern Colorado area office.

Green Mountain is expected to fill around July 10, and Ruedi is expected to fill around July 15.

While Colorado is looking "pretty darn good," as Kuhn said, trouble lies downstream, where the combined storage in two of the nation's largest reservoirs is declining.

Specifically, Lake Mead continues to see a drop in its water level to the point of a historic low. Water from Lake Powell has been released to stem Mead's decline. A forecast from the Bureau of Reclamation predicts 9 million acre-feet of water could be released from Lake Powell in 2016 to help Lake Mead.

The problem, Kuhn said, is the demand in the lower basin is outpacing supply.

Numbers, shared Wednesday night, for Lake Mead's water budget show an inflow of 9 million acre-feet, while outflow is 9.6 million AF. Evaporation claims another 0.6 million AF, which leads to a total deficit of 1.2 million AF.

While there has been a great deal of attention paid to the word "drought," Kuhn said conditions on the Colorado River have mostly been stable since 2005.

"I would argue we're not in a drought in the Colorado River Basin as a precipitation drought," he said. "We may be in a drought because the demand exceeds supply in the system, especially in the lower basin."

Should conditions worsen, it would exacerbate the situation.

As for when exactly conditions will worsen is uncertain, but Doesken said it could be right around the corner.

"This year we're just cooking along as pleasant as can be, but what do you know about drought," he asked. "It is always around the corner, so the longer we have little drought on the map the sooner we'll be back into the next drought. ... I guess I'd say that is a prediction."

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