Record low western US snowpack threatens water supplies for millions

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The record breaking heatwave that swept across the United States in mid-March has left the western US facing a looming water crisis.

Colorado snowpack, a major source of water for tens of millions of people, was already at a record low on March 17 at 8.3 inches of snow water equivalent (SWE), well below the median of 14 inches for that time of year. By March 31 it had plummeted to 3.3 inches. On April 26, average snowpack was just 2.1 inches, half the lowest value ever recorded by that date. In a typical year snowpack should not be this low until June.

Conditions are similar across the western US. Utah's snowpack also collapsed to less than half of the previous record low. In California, Oregon and Washington data from the SNOTEL (Snow Telemetry) monitoring system show nearly all stations below 50 percent of median and many are near or at zero. While not record shattering like in Utah and Colorado, the cumulative effect is still considerable.

Snowpack across California is just 20 percent of normal for a resource that accounts for 30 percent of the state's water supply. Such low snowpack will have far reaching effects for millions from the state's major metropolitan areas, to reduced water availability for farmland, and increased wildfire risk. Oregon is in a similar situation with snow at just 15 percent of normal.

Significantly, precipitation in many places did not decline for the western US. However, much of it fell as rain instead of snow during the winter, leaving much of it to runoff instead of staying in reserve as snow. Washington saw 104 percent of median precipitation but similar snowpack figures to Oregon and California.

Snowpack is an essential part of western water supplies, holding water in reserve to melt during the dry summer months. If snowpack melts too soon those reserves are disrupted and a significant portion of that melt water is lost as evaporation. Recent research has also shown that drier conditions in late spring and early summer are causing natural vegetation to consume more ground water and snow melt as they attempt to compensate for reduced spring rains caused by climate change.

While conditions in the Pacific Ocean are developing for a "Super El Niño," which will bring greater moisture to the western US but also hotter temperatures later this year. A warmer winter may convert snow into rain and weaken what should be a year of respite from reduced snowpack.

The US Bureau of Reclamation (USBR), which manages Lakes Mead and Powell along the Colorado River, the two largest reservoirs in the United States, has predicted a considerable decline in flows to the two reservoirs, modeling that storage in Lake Powell would drop below the amount needed to pass water into the hydropower turbines by August. This would be the first time water levels have dropped this low since the dam was first filled in the 1960s.

In an effort to prevent this the USBR has issued an emergency release of 1 million acre-feet of water from dams in the Upper Colorado Basin, enough water to fulfill the annual needs for about 2 million households. USBR will also hold up to 1.5 million acre-feet in Lake Powell to protect power production.

This comes at the cost of reducing storage and power production at Lake Mead downstream, with the USBR expecting a reduction in power production at Hoover Dam by up to 40 percent. Current projections for Lake Mead storage do not account for reduced inflows and only expect Lake Mead to fall below 1,050 feet of elevation—the level to trigger Tier 2 cuts to Arizona and Nevada—in 2027. By reducing flows to Lake Mead by

1.5 million acre-feet it will reach this level significantly faster.

Under current guidelines—which will expire later this year and are the subject of intense debate among Colorado River states—if Lake Mead falls below 1,050 feet Arizona will see cuts increase from 512,000 acre-feet to 592,000 and Nevada increase from 21,000 to 25,000. If levels drop below 1,045 feet Arizona will increase to 640,000 in cuts, Nevada to 27,000 and California will face their first cuts at 200,000 acre-feet. After this cuts will continue to increase up to levels of less than 1,025 feet, while Arizona faces 720,000, Nevada 30,000 and California 350,000 acre-feet in cuts to their allocations.

If the current operational guidelines for the Colorado River expire this fall without a new deal between the basin states, the federal government will have to impose its own proposals for cuts, several of which could saddle Arizona (which has junior water rights to California) with the brunt of reductions in supply, much of which is used as the primary water source for 6 million people.

Across the entire Colorado Basin the sudden implosion of snowpack exacerbates threats to the water supply for 40 million people and 5 million acres of farmland in seven US states and Mexico.

Arizona, California and Nevada have issued a proposal to conserve nearly 3 million acre-feet over the next two years to stabilize the reservoirs but it is only a temporary effort to contend with a more than 25-year problem.

This major snow drought will also be felt on the other side of the Rocky Mountains. Snow melt from mountains in Colorado, Wyoming and New Mexico feeds major rivers like the Rio Grande, Arkansas, Missouri and Platte rivers, many of which are tributaries to the Mississippi.

This is significant because the southern US, from Texas to Virginia, is experiencing severe to exceptional drought, according to the US Drought Monitor. Reduced headwater flows from the Rockies will only amplify these conditions.

Corpus Christi declaring a “level-one water emergency”

Expressing the severity of the drought conditions affecting much of the United States, Corpus Christi, Texas is preparing to declare a “level-one water emergency” in September and may be required to order a 25 percent reduction in water use across all users.

Suffering from drought for more than a year, the city has banned watering of lawns and restricted activities such as washing cars to specific days.

As is the case with much of the western US, the issue is a fundamental divide between supply and demand. In the Colorado River Basin and California the largest water users are large agricultural interests that consume upwards of 90 percent of all water used. For Corpus Christi the crisis is fed by declining supplies from climate change and increasing demand from the local petrochemical industry.

This is a recurring theme around the world in which the imbalance between supply and demand cannot be rectified without a complete restructuring of how water is used. A recent report from the United Nations defined this condition as “water bankruptcy,” in which much of the world’s water systems are so overburdened that only a complete rebalancing of demand to match supplies could prevent a system collapse.

While climate change intensifies these conditions, global capitalist governments have proven wholly incapable of effectively responding. This is not for a lack of knowledge or solutions but because of the incompatibility of capitalist interests with the necessary measures needed to restructure global economies.

As has been demonstrated with the failure of the capitalist system to effectively respond to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, anything that infringes on the profits of the corporations and Wall Street is rejected and suppressed, even if the long-term consequences of inaction pale in comparison to short-term costs. The same is true for water resource management as overstressed regions like the Colorado River toboggan towards catastrophe.