

Blue Mesa Reservoir in crisis amid historic drought

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If you're a farmer or rancher in the Montrose area, you've found yourself having to make due with less water than usual. That means fewer crops than usual. You've also likely fallowed much of your soil, adding reconditioning work to your list of tasks in the future.

If you're an endangered fish species such as a humpback chub or a razorback sucker, you still have freedom to live and explore in the Gunnison River after being released from a recovery program, but low water levels impede on your ability to thrive.

If you're a boater at Blue Mesa Reservoir, your only real chance to get out on the water this summer has been to relocate your vessel to another, deeper marina, lest it rest on hardening dirt and face the risk of corrosion.

As of July 12, Blue Mesa Reservoir near Gunnison sat only 32% full at 266,000 acre feet of storage water — about 35,000 acre feet less than the historic minimum for that date, down 35%.

Severe drought conditions at the reservoir have resulted in critically low storage levels, a limitation on water allocation to the Uncompahgre Valley and its agricultural water users, limited flows for releasing endangered fish species, decreased recreational

opportunities on the water that go hand-in-hand with a downturn in the regional recreational economy, and uncertainty over power generation and water usage in the near future.

Colorado River District spokeswoman Lindsay DeFrates called it a “crisis”, as the reservoir and the Wayne N. Aspinall Unit — which stores water and generates hydroelectric power through the reservoir as well as the Morrow Point and Crystal Reservoir dams — is one of the upper units that feeds the crucial Lake Powell downstream.

“Everyone’s looking downstream at Lake Powell while we have this happening in our backyard right now,” De-Frates said.

The impacts are already being felt — and they could worsen in the near future without a substantially snowy winter and spring.

When he was the Division 4 assistant engineer for the Colorado Division of Water Resources (DWR), Jason Ullmann would have never entertained the notion that the Black Canyon of

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the Gunnison National Park’s portion of the river could ever dry up. Now, as the DWR director and Colorado state engineer, he said it’s unlikely to happen this year or next — but it’s “not an impossibility.”

“The actual inflow from April to July this year was the lowest on

record. Barring a change in the climate conditions that produce this monsoon everybody's waiting for, it doesn't seem like we're going to have a significant increase in inflow. We're going to have one of the lowest inflow seasons — if not the lowest — on record at Blue Mesa," Ullmann said. "Blue Mesa started the year approximately 20 feet below the normal level it would start the year on. The water levels are very low and will continue to drop."

Colorado River District Senior Water Resources Engineer Caleb Foy compared 2026 to some of the region's driest years — 1977, 2002, 2012 and 2018 — and said 2026 "takes the gold medal in terms of poor hydrological conditions", impacting water storage at Blue Mesa Reservoir which, in turn, has multiple impacts downstream.

"Low storage levels in Blue Mesa Reservoir have implications on flows available for the endangered fish in the lower Gunnison River. It has implications on flows through the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park just below the reservoir," Foy said.

"It has implications on flows available to the Redlands Water and Power Company that diverts water at the very bottom of the Gunnison River just a few miles upstream of its confluence with the Colorado River as an entity that diverts water from the Gunnison River that can, at times, be comprised primarily of these releases out of Blue Mesa Reservoir, to generate both hydropower as well as provide irrigation water to Redlands Mesa just outside of Grand Junction."

Additionally, moving forward, it could impact flows through the Gunnison Tunnel that supply agricultural water users in the Uncompahgre Valley.

POWER GENERATION AND ENDANGERED FISH

Foy noted that the reservoir's storage could drop below the power pool level, which is the minimum amount of water needed to produce hydropower from the dam. According to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's June 2026 24-month study, this drop could happen as soon as February 2027. According to other forecasts, this drop could happen as soon as the end of this summer if the region sees no monsoon conditions and current operations aren't modified to preserve storage at the reservoir.

If the water drops below the power pool, per the Bureau of Reclamation, Blue Mesa Dam would not fully shut off, but it would become a "run of the river" generator, meaning all flows into the reservoir would then leave the reservoir, providing a Band-Aid to the power generation issue but worsening the reservoir's overall water level woes — woes that have led to marina relocations and the impending closure of boat ramps.

In this scenario, Morrow Point Dam and Crystal Dam would continue to generate power.

The BOR told The Daily Sentinel that the bureau releases water from the Aspinall Unit for two flow targets: the Black Canyon of the Gunnison and the Gunnison River near Grand Junction, with the former helping the National Park Service meet management obligations, and the latter helping the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the bureau meet Endangered Species Act requirements while meeting the diversion rights of the Redlands canal, powerplant and fish ladder.

A reduction in downstream flow would negatively affect downstream

diversions, Colorado River flow, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, and endangered fish species in both the Gunnison and Colorado rivers.

The BOR has worked with Fish and Wildlife to temporarily reduce flow targets while trying to minimize negative impacts to endangered fish species.

Ullmann said the minimal target flow for the Endangered Fish Recovery Rights is, in a typical year, no lower than 750 cubic feet per second. This year, the target is at 750 cfs — and last week, the flow was as low as 700 cfs. This has been alarming enough to spark conversations between the state and the BOR.

WATER USE SPLIT IN HALF

A portion of the water stored in the reservoir is released to the Gunnison River, travels through Morrow Point and Crystal reservoirs, and is then diverted through the Gunnison Tunnel below Morrow Point. The Gunnison Tunnel takes over 1,000 cfs to the Uncompahgre Valley for irrigation. This is the source of water for the Uncompahgre Valley, which includes Montrose and the surrounding area.

The maximum tunnel diversion so far this year has been 1,068 cfs.

To adjust to water scarcity, the Uncompahgre Valley Water Users Association (UVWUA) has only allowed 50% of its allotments, not only for the average water user but also for ranches and farms.

The only positive, per UVWUA General Manager Steve Pope, is that they were aware of these conditions early enough to spread regional

awareness of the water limitation to come.

“Fortunately for us, we participated in some aerial snow observation flights in the upper Gunnison and Uncompahgre Basin. We had a good sense early that this was going to be a dire year,” Pope said. “The best thing we did for water users is we let them know early that we were projecting to only be able to operate at 50%. They didn’t go and plant more than they could water. They were able to make those decisions; although they were hard decisions, they were able to make them early and try to enroll in crop insurance and preventative planting programs, so they were able to enroll their lands in some of those.”

The UVWUA also operates the Taylor Park Reservoir near Cottonwood Pass for extra water through an agreement with the BOR and the Colorado River District. This extra water can go toward downstream users and for recreational purposes in the Taylor River, and then the water goes into a pool in the Blue Mesa Reservoir that can be used to prop up tunnel demand. However, this on its own is not enough to provide a solution.

“Our concern is that, at the end of this year, given the lack of snowpack and the bureau’s need to meet downstream flow requirements for records and decisions on the native fish at the Whitewater gauge and through the Black Canyon, is that Blue Mesa’s going to be drawn down to a level where only our pool of water exists. The concern is that, maybe not this year but next year, when I turn my system on, they can’t release our water downstream past my headgate since it’s not the bureau’s water to release. Next year, I’m going to need that water early in the season when the runoff hasn’t fired up yet and we have a demand on the tunnel to get water

for our producers,” Pope said.

“We don’t have the water in the Uncompahgre side of our system, so we’re operating solely on our tunnel deliveries. We’re only delivering 50% of our allocation to our water users. The large-production farmers in our system have fallowed between 30-60% of their lands. They were forced to.”

Pope then said that, with all that fallowed ground, producers are going to have to deal with weeds to recondition their soil, adding additional expenses amid their other drought-related problems. He’s concerned that, without a moist winter and spring, some producers might end up going out of business.

He also echoed fears that, although unlikely, conditions could exist that dry up the Black Canyon.

“If the inflows into the Aspinall Units next year are not sufficient to meet our needs and we’re out of our Taylor Park pool, we will be forced to place an administrative call on the Gunnison River. The state engineers’ office would require us to dry up the river, which would dry the river through the Black Canyon and really not allow for the meeting of the flows at the Whitewater gauge for the record of decisions,” Pope said.

“That’s the big fear right there: our tunnel demands could effectively dry up the Black Canyon.”

The BOR told The Daily Sentinel: “Reclamation is actively working to mitigate any worst-case scenarios and preserve instream flows within Black Canyon. Current hydrology makes this outcome highly improbable in the near term.”

WATER RIGHTS

An administrative call, as Pope mentioned, could come from the Gunnison Tunnel or the Redlands Water and Power Company. If such a call is made as a result of water releases not satisfying their senior water rights, it would curtail upstream junior water users.

The DWR, which administers prior appropriations on water rights, would be the entity to determine how water would be allocated in such a scenario. The Aspinall Unit keeps accounting sheets detailing water rights along the Gunnison River. The department has communicated with the BOR about their concerns and ways to reduce water releases.

Ullmann noted that Redlands Water and Power has senior water rights that would trump the water rights of users downstream.

Foy added historical context that the Gunnison Tunnel has not made an administrative call since 2003 and Redlands Water and Power has not made such a call since 2002. A call from the former, Foy said, would impact water users “profoundly” in the upper Gunnison River watershed, and a call from the latter would call out all water rights junior to its senior water rights throughout the entire Gunnison River Basin.

HOW CAN THESE CONDITIONS IMPROVE?

The Daily Sentinel asked the BOR what kind of winter and spring would be needed to reverse the drought trends of 2026.

“Reversing drought trends in western Colorado reservoirs would require a cold, wet winter delivering at least median or above

snowpack, and a cool, steady spring producing enough inflow to Blue Mesa to activate sustained peak releases and move the system toward refill categories," the bureau responded. "Given current conditions, significant recovery won't occur without a much better winter/ spring season than we've seen through 2026. Recent forecasts project Blue Mesa inflow at just 23–42% of average."

Ullmann, asked the same question, said, "Unfortunately, we don't have control over hydrology at this point. Even if we finish the year out this year and end up with enough in the reservoir to tide us over, if we don't have a good water year next year and we start the year with low amounts in storage, and that drives concerns from water users that want to place a call for their water, that's where we'll run into a situation where there's potential for other impacts."

"This is a really bad year and we are hoping that precipitation in the late summer and fall can make a difference. It won't fix the storage situation at the Aspinall Unit. We need good snowpack next year to improve the conditions in the reservoir."

In the meantime, Foy is not holding his breath for improved hydrologic conditions to save the day at Blue Mesa Reservoir. The Colorado River District has recently convened stakeholders from throughout the basin to discuss modifying operations at Blue Mesa Reservoir to preserve storage in the reservoir to the greatest extent possible, while also identifying methods to mitigate any potential impacts resulting from modified operations.

This Colorado River Basin photo from early July 2026 shows the low water levels at the Blue Mesa Reservoir near Gunnison. As of July 12, Blue Mesa Reservoir sat only 32% full at 266,000 acre feet of storage water — about 35,000 acre feet less than the historic

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PHOTO FROM THE COLORADO RIVER BASIN

This Colorado River Basin photo from early July 2026 shows the low water levels at the Blue Mesa Reservoir near Gunnison. Severe drought conditions at the reservoir have resulted in critically low storage levels, a limitation on water allocation to the Uncompahgre Valley and its agricultural water users, limited flows for releasing endangered fish species, decreased recreational opportunities on the water that go hand-in-hand with a downturn in the regional recreational economy, and uncertainty over power generation and water usage in the near future.

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This Colorado River Basin photo from early July 2026 shows the low water levels at the Blue Mesa Reservoir near Gunnison. The impacts of the low water levels at the reservoir are already being felt — and they could worsen in the near future without a substantially snowy winter and spring.

PHOTOS FROM THE COLORADO RIVER BASIN