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## 'State of the River:' Could be better, but ...

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Conditions show wide-spread drought in region

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[George Sibley | Special to the Times](#)

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The fickle “children of the Pacific Ocean,” El Niño and La Niña, have again dealt the Gunnison River Basin a bad hand. A weak La Niña winter sent the storm-bearing jet streams over the northwestern United States and southern Canada, leaving the Southwest, and southern half of Colorado, relatively dry for 2025, according to Bob Hurford, Colorado’s Division 4 (Gunnison Basin) Engineer.

Hurford visited Gunnison on April 17 for an annual “State of the River” program, along with Andy Mueller, general manager of the Colorado River Water Conservation District, known as the “River District,” the program’s sponsor. Sonja Chavez, manager of the Upper Gunnison River Water

Conservancy District, and Jesse Kruthaupt, Gunnison agent for Trout Unlimited's Colorado Restoration Program spoke on the state of the Upper Gunnison River.

Hurford led with a discussion of what is unfolding locally in water year 2025 (Oct. 1, 2024 through Sept. 30, 2025). The Upper Gunnison Basin's April 1 snowpack (usually at or near the maximum depth for the winter) contains only 59% of the 30-year average water content. It is projected at this point to yield through July about 540,000 acre-feet of runoff or less for the river — probably not enough to fill Blue Mesa Reservoir after downstream water rights are filled. An acre-foot of water is the amount it would take to cover the playing area of a football field to the depth of one foot.

As the changing climate warms the planet, March is becoming the “new April.” This year's snowpack peaked in mid-March. With the big melt usually beginning sooner nowadays, spring-like weather is causing trees and other plants to also begin “drinking” sooner.

The Bureau of Reclamation is managing releases from Blue Mesa and the other Aspinall Unit reservoirs under protocols for an “average dry” water year. Another cold and wet “Miracle May” like the Gunnison Basin had in 2015 could change that, but does not appear in the projections.

Increasing evaporation and plant transpiration also come with the changing climate. According to Mueller, for every additional degree Fahrenheit in the ambient temperatures, another 3-5% of water on the surface and in plants disappears as water vapor. These are changes to be anticipated for as long as we continue to warm the planet's climate. Hurford concluded his presentation with a chart indicating that the decade beginning with 2020 is on track at this point to be the driest decade on record, including the droughts of the 1930s and 2000s.

Mueller and Chavez indicated that their organizations are trying to mitigate and adapt to the challenges presented by relentlessly growing demands on a diminishing river — and to protect Western Slope water users. The River District was created by the state legislature in 1937 with what seemed like a “mission impossible”: to protect Colorado's share of the Colorado River in basin-wide developments — and to try to keep most of Colorado's share of the river on the West Slope.

Roughly two-thirds of the Colorado River's entire water supply is produced in the River District's 15 West Slope counties. This same water is needed by much larger entities both downstream and across the Continental Divide.

A century ago in 1922, the seven states through which the Colorado River meanders created a compact dividing the use of most of the river's water equally between an Upper Basin (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming) and a Lower Basin (Arizona, California and Nevada). Post-compact river flows, however, did not measure up to the amount of water divided in that Colorado River Compact.

The Upper Basin also bears the burden of variable flows due to the vagaries of the western desert climate, while the Lower Basin always gets its share due to storage in the big Mead and Powell Reservoirs. Bad feelings about these inequities simmered through the 20th century.

But in the very first decade of the 21st century, reality caught up with the two basins in the form of alarmingly reduced water storage, forcing the states in 2007 to adopt new 20-year “interim guidelines” for the operation of the river's storage and distribution systems. By 2022, however, it was apparent that the interim guidelines were insufficient at stopping the hemorrhage of storage. Reclamation imposed

much more restrictive cuts to Lower Basin users, which they agreed to only if the federal government reimbursed individuals for leaving some of their water in Mead Reservoir storage.

Now, Mueller said, state representatives in both basins are working to develop a new set of post-2026 management guidelines, but are locked in a stalemate that has lasted close to a year over the shortages that each basin should bear. The Lower Basin has argued that any further cuts to protect Mead-Powell storage should be divided between the two basins. The Upper Basin arguments are based on the unresolved inequity in the Colorado River Compact, and the fact that the Upper Basin absorbs all of the shortages imposed by dry-year hydrology, and therefore should not also be expected to take further cuts.

Reclamation has said that the agency will (reluctantly) impose a plan for the management of their storage and delivery systems if the states cannot resolve their impasse. It has laid out five plans to choose among, from straight-out federal management to varying hybrids incorporating ideas from the two basins. That is essentially the state of the “Big River” today: stalemate with a year and seven months to go.

Mueller went on to describe some more positive River District activities at home. The district has taken the lead on securing a huge instream water right for the river’s mainstem — the 1902 and 1929 water rights of the Shoshone hydropower plant right on the river in Glenwood Canyon. Its ownership on the West Slope would effectively preclude any further major transmountain diversions.

The price is \$99 million, a bargain in the opinion of most West Slope water users. But the sale at this point hangs on a \$40 million grant from former President Joe Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act. These funds have been frozen by the Trump administration “pending further review.”

Bringing the “State of the River” home to the Upper Gunnison River, Chavez spoke to the “boots on the ground” challenges associated with watersheds where more than 90% of the water is committed to agricultural irrigation. At the same time, a growing economic sector is water-based outdoor recreation.

There are also the challenges related to climate change, and aging infrastructure needing repair and replacement. The state may soon require measuring devices on all diversions. Chavez regards “defense of the way we use our water” a challenging function of the water district, in a world increasingly questioning water consumption in beef production.

The Upper Gunnison has a valuable partner in this work through Trout Unlimited, which takes seriously and actively its commitment to “protect, restore and sustain” water resources. Their man on the ground, Jesse Kruthaupt, showed pictures of projects he has engineered, and found funding for. Some truly imaginative and also common sense projects combine headgates for water conveyance ditches that conserve a little water. Others create permanent structures for diversions traditionally managed by putting a bulldozer or backhoe in the stream to raise a temporary diversion weir.

What can one say at the end of an evening of analysis and evaluation on the “State of the Gunnison River”? Only that the river is part of a larger river whose managers are having trouble anticipating its future. But the managers of the Gunnison River are working hard, collaboratively, and often creatively, to deal with those challenges down where they have to be dealt with.

(George Sibley is a Gunnison writer, thinker and elder of the headwaters.)

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