

A century of federal indifference left generations of Navajo homes without running water

Written by By Elizabeth Miller New Mexico In Depth April 12, 2021
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CONCLUSION: A deal climate change could bust

As part of the settlement that made the Navajo-Gallup Project a possibility, the Navajo Nation shifted its priority date from 1868, when the reservation was established and among the earliest rights in the Colorado River Basin, to 1955.

“That’s yesterday, in terms of water rights,” Brad Udall, senior water and climate research scientist at Colorado State University, said.

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Given that the system puts the newest rights at the top of the list to cut when faced with a shortage, that puts Navajo water supplies in the crosshairs when faced with ongoing drought and increasing aridification of the Southwest.

Flows in the entire Colorado River Basin are down by 20 percent, at least half of which is attributed to climate change. That exacerbates the ongoing over-allocation of water in the Colorado River, which counts on seeing 17 million acre feet per year of water in a basin that has reported only about 12.6 million acre feet in recent years. Water managers have been scrambling to avoid a brewing crisis for the millions of people who depend on the river for water, and for the river itself.

“There’s a tenuous balance that exists between supply and demand right now, so if you add demands or reduce supply, you’re going to knock the system out of balance,” Udall said. The more factors climate change researchers consider, the more dire that situation becomes.

Lower Basin States have grown to use their full allowable water, or even a little more. But Upper Basin states still use just about 4.3 million acre feet per year.

“For New Mexico, we take our settlement with the Navajo Nation and Jicarilla Apache Nation very seriously, and the water we’re talking about here for human uses is a really big piece of that,” Rolf Schmidt-Petersen, director of New Mexico’s Interstate Stream Commission, said. “It’s human uses in this area, potential for economic development in those areas, and potential for reducing human health and safety risks, so we see that as being really, very important, and because we’re still using well less than our Upper Basin compact agreement, that’s still reasonable to do.”

The Navajo Nation has said that if water runs short, under certain circumstances, they’ll reduce diversions to their farms to leave more water for downstream users, he added. The settlement also committed the Navajo Nation to add \$45 million in water conservation measures to the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project, so annual water needs there could shrink.

The agreement protects the water supply for farms, power plants, and residents of Albuquerque

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and Santa Fe.

Even faced with diminished river flows, water managers point to the Navajo and Cutter reservoirs, which will supply the San Juan and Cutter laterals.

“To the extent they rely on reservoir water, it’s going to be more reliable than most sources on the river,” Eric Kuhn, former general manager of the Colorado River Water Conservation District and co-author of *Science Be Dammed: How Ignoring Inconvenient Science Drained the Colorado River*, said. “I’d rather be below Navajo Reservoir and relying on Navajo Reservoir than below Lake Mead and relying on Lake Mead.”

But Janene Yazzie, co-founder of Sixth World Solutions contends the whole system may need to be rethought.

“We assume there’s plenty of water out there, we just need the infrastructure to bring it to us,” she said. “I think what would be important in this time is to recognize how unsustainable our demand has become, and how important it is for us to build collective consciousness and collective power around restoring our responsibility to maintaining these water systems.”

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