

Wet Blanket



[DOOMBERG](#)

JUL 12, 2023

“If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.” – Loren Eiseley

For centuries, Tulare Lake occupied the cultural and spiritual center of the Tachi Yokut tribe of California’s Central Valley. The lake was foundational to the tribe’s [creation story](#) and provided the resources needed to thrive. Between the late 19th– and early 20th–centuries, a rather direct form of anthropological climate change saw the lake drained completely dry, devastating the Tachi Yokut way of life. Upstream waters were dammed and diverted with abandon, and the region was largely converted to prime agricultural farmland. Since that time, elders of the tribe tell stories of the lake’s mythical role in their people’s former way of life, passing down the belief that it would someday be returned to them.

In 2023, salvation arrived in the [form](#) of *“the greatest year-over-year water gains in two decades.”* Throughout California, historic drought has been beaten back by a string of monstrous precipitation episodes, leaving the media rather [confused](#) as to whether this is something to be celebrated. For the Tachi Yokut tribe, the recent turn of events is nothing short of a miracle, as Tulare Lake has indeed reappeared as the elders had prophesized. They are now fighting with state authorities to keep the lake the way it was before settlers interfered. Here’s how the *Los Angeles Times* [describes](#) the surprising turn of events (emphasis added throughout):

“During the winter, as heavy rains and snow swept across California, rivers that had dwindled during the drought swelled with runoff and flowed full from the Sierra Nevada into the valley, spilling from channels and gushing through broken levees onto farmland. As the floodwaters inundated fields that had

produced tomatoes and cotton, workers evacuated tractors, pumps and sprinkler pipes.

*By mid-March, the lake had reclaimed more than 10,000 acres. It continued growing, inundating dairies, pistachio orchards and farmhouses. It rose beside levees that protect the city of Corcoran and its giant prison complex. **The lake has now grown to cover more than 113,000 acres, an area nearly as large as Lake Tahoe.***”



Vindication of faith | LA Times

Here we have an example of nature undoing artificially altered ecosystems, restoring the region to its pre-industrial form more closely. This development would seem to align with the stated objectives of progressive environmentalists. For those displaced by the floods, the affair has undoubtedly been a tragedy—difficult tradeoffs are inevitable under all climate scenarios. As [noted](#) by ecologist-turned-climate-skeptic Jim Steele, much of the traditional media has been putting a rather more negative spin on this unexpected turn of events. A recent *NBC News* [article](#) ominously titled “Climate in Crisis: Tulare Lake

Reforms Causing Flooding” unironically claims “*area people have worked for a century to make California’s Tulare Basin into a food grower’s paradise,*” and the reappearance of the lake is “*another example weather whiplash due to the influence of climate change which can make extremes more intense and more frequent.*”

Whiplash, indeed.

The winter of 2022-2023 has revitalized much of the US Southwest, including the all-important Colorado River Basin. When we last [checked in](#) on the sixth longest river in North America, the situation was reaching a breaking point. The economic livelihood of 40 million people was under threat, as were the operations of two of the largest hydroelectric dams in the country. Is the crisis now over, or is this just a temporary reprieve? What can this episode teach us about our capacity to effectively respond to an ever-changing climate? Let’s cut through the propaganda and examine the source data for some concrete answers.

We begin with a refresher on just how vital the Colorado River is to a vast swath of the US economy. This is how we [framed](#) it in “Buy Me a River,” published back in April of last year:

“The Colorado River stretches 1,450 miles from the Rocky Mountains towards the Gulf of California (it now runs dry before getting there in most years). It is fed by a large river basin that sprawls over seven states, but the primary driver of water flow is the annual snowmelt in the Rockies. With 15 dams on the main stem of the river and a dizzying array of canals, the water from the Colorado River is likely the most controversial and heavily litigated on the planet – literally every drop is fought after and accounted for. Each action upstream impacts the people downstream, and the allocation decisions are made using agreements that were struck as long as a century ago.”



Colorado River Basin | Wikipedia

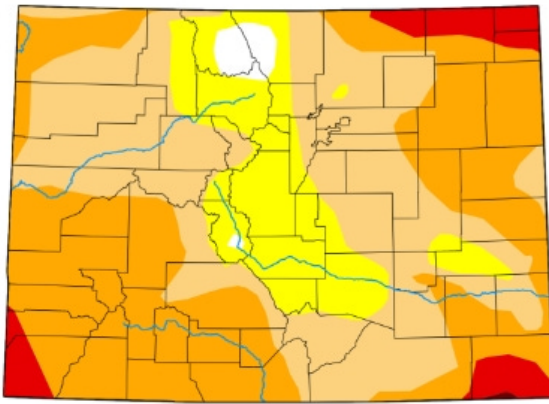
The two largest hydroelectric dams on the Colorado River are the Hoover Dam near Lake Mead and the Glen Canyon Dam near Lake Powell. The latter sits upstream from the former, and the political decisions about how much water the Glen Canyon Dam releases occupy the mindshare of countless government

officials, lawyers, and farmers alike. For years, a devastating drought triggered scores of news reports with apocalyptic undertones. And now, an astonishing reversal is dampening the narrative. While not the highest snowpack ever recorded in the Colorado Rockies, this winter's precipitation was substantially above historical averages, as evidenced by how much snowpack [remained](#) as of mid-June:

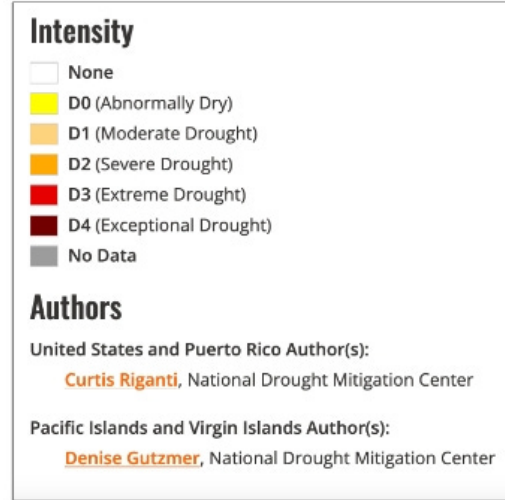
“According to the USDA, Colorado's snowpack is currently at 323 percent of the to-date norm, with an initial steep spring drop-off due to melting slowed by cooler temperatures and more fresh powder. Colorado's statewide 1.6 inches of snow water equivalent on June 15 is well-above the 0.5 inch norm.

*The highest snowpack statewide is found in the Gunnison River Basin, which includes towns of Crested Butte, Gunnison, and Ouray. **This is especially shocking, as snowpack in this region during this time of the year is typically non-existent.** Meanwhile, the Colorado Headwaters Region, which includes the Central Mountains extending westward along I-70, **is at a wild 617 percent of its normal snowpack.**”*

We took a quick spin on the Wayback Machine to compare the state's drought maps over the past two Fourth of July holidays. For the first time in years, no part of the state is experiencing abnormally dry conditions, let alone any degree of drought:



← **July 5, 2022**



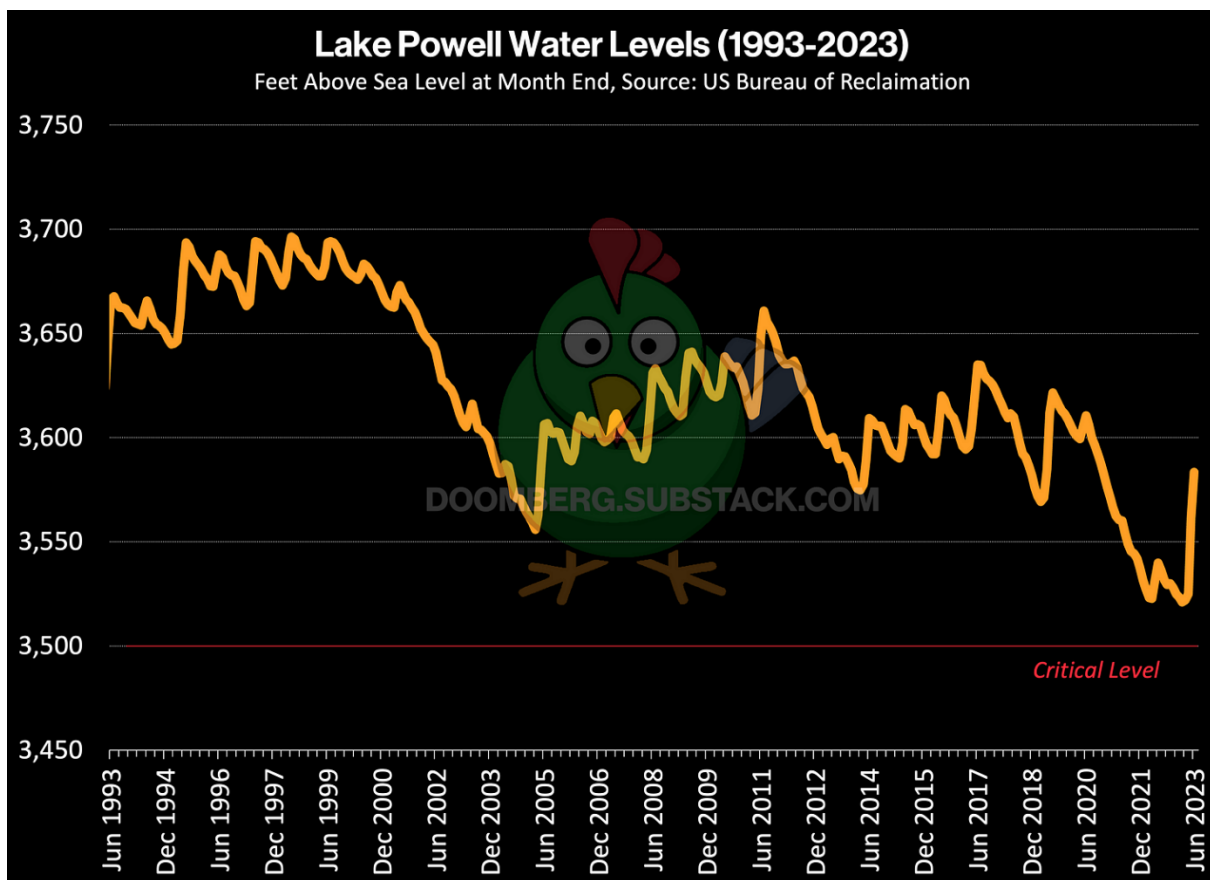
← **July 4, 2023**

This should be cause for significant celebration. The climate gods have granted the region a much-needed reprieve, and data collected all along the Colorado River reflects just what a historic turnaround this has been. Even the *Washington Post* had to [begrudgingly](#) admit the situation is improving (although it was compelled to remind its readers that things could quickly unravel):

*“Weeks after the surface of Lake Powell sunk to an all-time low, the key Colorado River reservoir is rising more than a foot a day – on track to deepen by some 70 feet in the coming months. **Spring flows into the lake are among the highest observed in its history.** That could mean long-stranded boat ramps regain water access this summer. Already, the bolstered water levels allowed for recent dam releases that sent rapids surging down the Grand Canyon for the first time in five years.*

But whatever optimism the recent boost might create, it should not extend beyond this year, said Bart Leeﬂang, the Colorado River program manager for the Central Utah Water Conservancy District. Though snowpack that feeds the river is among the basin’s deepest in decades, one expert noted that it would take nearly a decade of wet years to refill Lake Powell.”

Perhaps our arithmetic skills are a bit rusty, but after analyzing official government [data](#) from the Bureau of Reclamation, measured water levels at Lake Powell would seem to contradict Mr. Leeﬂang’s pessimism. The sheer slope of the water level rise is unprecedented, freeing up the facility to simultaneously provide reliable, carbon-free power to the region while also releasing extra water downstream for use in the Lower Basin states. The Hoover Dam at Lake Meade is a significant [beneficiary](#) of these developments. A few more years like this and we’ll be worried about whether the Glen Canyon Dam can hold all that water. Imagine what a decade of “wet years” would look like!



Importantly, the whims of Gaia have smiled on the region just as it was beginning to get its political act together. To its credit, the Biden administration has been pressing states in the Lower Basin to step up their conservation efforts, offering federal funds to compensate for the needed sacrifices. In late May, a negotiated [breakthrough](#) was achieved that—assuming all parties follow through on their commitments—will only add to the stabilizing effects of this winter’s water bounty:

*“But the river has been drying up for more than two decades. To stabilize it, California, Arizona, and Nevada — the three states that make up the system’s ‘Lower Basin’ — reached an agreement with the Biden administration to conserve 3 million acre-feet of water over the next three years, **which is 13 percent of those states’ total allocation from the river.** One acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons of water.*

In exchange, the Biden administration will compensate the states with about \$1.2 billion in federal funds.”

We can’t help but note the relative pittance it took to drive this solution. While \$1.2 billion is certainly a lot of money in the absolute, from the perspective of federal appropriators it amounts to nothing more than a rounding error, especially when compared to the hundreds of billions gushing from the *Inflation Reduction Act of 2022*. This begs the question of what exactly are we doing with all that money? In this instance, a legitimate national climate emergency was abated by a natural shift in the weather and a modest amount of money invested in adapting to the new climate reality. Why can’t that be our general approach?

Seems like a bargain to us.

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