

Drought on tap to intensify over US Southwest

May 23 2018, by Susan Montoya Bryan

Rivers are drying up, popular mountain recreation spots are closing and water restrictions are in full swing as a persistent drought intensifies its grip on pockets of the American Southwest.

Climatologists and other experts are scheduled Wednesday to provide an update on the situation in the Four Corners region—where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah meet.

The area is dealing with exceptional drought—the worst category. That has left farmers, ranchers and water planners bracing for a much different situation than just a year ago when only a fraction of the region was experiencing low levels of dryness.

With the region's water resources strained, a top federal official has resumed pressure on states in the Southwest to wrap up long-delayed emergency plans for potential shortages on the Colorado River, which serves 40 million people in the U.S. and Mexico.

"We face an overwhelming risk on the system, and the time for action is now," Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Brenda Burman said Tuesday. She spoke before the Imperial Irrigation District in Southern California, one of the biggest single users of the Colorado River.

The drought has hit the Colorado River hard. Forecasters say the river will carry only about 43 percent of its average amount of water this year into Lake Powell, one of two big reservoirs on the system.

There's a 52 percent chance that Mexico and the states of Arizona and Nevada will take a mandatory cut in their share of water in 2020 under the agreements governing the river, forecasters have said.

In New Mexico, stretches of the Rio Grande—another one of North America's longest rivers—have already gone dry as federal biologists have been forced to scoop up as many endangered Rio Grande silvery minnows as possible so they can be moved upstream.

The river this summer is expected to dry as far north as Albuquerque, New Mexico's most populous city. The area saw its first major dose of rain this week, bringing an end to a 54-day dry spell. It wasn't enough to make up for months without meaningful precipitation.

Management of the Rio Grande and the groundwater associated with it is at the center of a legal battle that has been simmering before the U.S. Supreme Court since 2013.

New Mexico Attorney General Hector Balderas late Tuesday filed counterclaims against Texas and the federal government, claiming they also bear responsibility to ensure proper allocation and accounting of water if the region hopes to have a sustainable future.

"While this case initially should have been resolved without filing a costly lawsuit, I am excited New Mexico will finally get to tell its unified story about how Texas and the United States have unfairly tried to scapegoat New Mexico," Balderas said Wednesday.

Texas officials did not immediately return a message seeking comment on New Mexico's claims.

Balderas, who inherited the case from former Attorney General Gary King, said he's still hoping to resolve the lawsuit but wants to protect

New Mexicans from paying "an unjust price."

It could be years before the court issues a ruling on the merits of the case. Depending on the outcome, New Mexico could be forced to pay millions of dollars in damages despite the state's claims that water deliveries have been met and that Texas has not suffered any damages.

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