

Colorado's demand for water is slated to surpass supplies by 2050: Did lawmakers do enough to address the crisis?

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As Colorado's rivers shrink and its soils dry out, state lawmakers this year passed a slew of water bills that advocates say will help reduce water use and protect the critical natural resource.

Nine major bills aim to reduce [water use](#) in cities, replace nixed federal protections of wetlands and minimize the amount of toxic "forever chemicals" leaching into [water supplies](#). Gov. Jared Polis already has signed four of the bills into law, while four more await his signature and one will go to voters.

"It was a pretty big year for water under the dome," said Bart Miller, the healthy rivers director at Western Resource Advocates, who has been monitoring Colorado water policy for 20 years. "It feels like the state is stepping up to take advantage of this moment of time—and not just sit idly by—as climate change makes our climate drier and our rivers shrink."

But momentum must continue if Colorado is to avoid looming [water shortages](#), lawmakers and advocates said. Critical conversations about paying farmers and others to use less water and making sure that conserved water is used thoughtfully must turn into policy, they said.

Colorado's demand for water is expected to outpace its supply by 2050 as the population grows and [climate change](#) sucks moisture from streams and snow, according to state water experts. By that time, municipal and industrial water users every year could be short up to 240 billion gallons. Shortages already faced by Colorado's agriculture sector will grow.

Lawmakers in recent years have responded to that crisis and momentum has grown around water policy at the Capitol, advocates said.

The biggest achievement this year, lawmakers and advocates said, was the passage of House Bill 1379, which fills a gap in wetlands and stream

protection created by a U.S. Supreme Court decision last year.

Colorado was the first state to pass legislation to address the decision, in which the court ruled that the federal Clean Water Act did not protect wetlands and temporary streams. The May 2023 ruling left more than half of Colorado's waters without protections and regulations for construction activity.

Polis has not yet signed the bill, which would create a program in the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to regulate dredge and fill activities.

"It was critical to make this a priority for the legislature this session," said House Speaker Julie McCluskie, one of the bill's sponsors. "In a drought that has stressed our water resources in significant ways, there couldn't be more urgency to make sure we're protecting every waterway as best we can."

Among other water-related bills passed this session were two focused on quality: Senate Bill 81, which has been signed into law, bans the sale of some consumer products with intentionally added PFAS chemicals—like cookware and ski wax—beginning in 2026 and another class of products in 2028, in part to reduce how much of the chemicals reach waterways. And Senate Bill 37 (not yet signed into law) orders a study of ways to use "green infrastructure" to improve water quality.

Voters will be asked in November to decide a ballot measure referred by House Bill 1436 allowing the state to keep more sports betting tax revenue for state water projects. The measure would remove the cap on the amount of money that goes for those projects.

Currently, any tax revenue above \$29 million each year is returned to the betting companies.

Several other bills are targeted at conservation in various ways:

- Senate Bill 197 (not yet signed into law), would implement recommendations from the Colorado River Drought Task Force convened last year. That includes making it easier for tribal nations to apply for state water grants and allowing people who hold agricultural water rights to loan them to the state water conservation board to boost flows.
- Senate Bill 5 (signed into law), bans the installation of new non-functional turf and [artificial turf](#) on commercial, industrial, government and HOA-owned property beginning in 2026.
- House Bill 1362 (signed into law), allows the installation of graywater systems in new construction statewide. Graywater systems collect water after its first use and reuse it for a variety of purposes, like flushing toilets or watering plants.
- House Bill 1435 (not yet signed), would allocate \$56 million to water projects through state agencies, including water supply forecasting and turf replacement. The bill also includes \$20 million for the purchase of the Shoshone power plant water rights.
- Senate Bill 148 (signed into law), allows stormwater facilities to harvest and store rain running off hard surfaces like asphalt.

There will likely be further tweaks to the dredge-and-fill legislation for wetlands and seasonal streams as the program is implemented, said Stu Gillespie, a senior attorney at environmental conservation law firm Earthjustice. More stringent protections might be needed, he said, as the nation's wetlands were being eradicated even before the Supreme Court decision.

Overall, the water-related legislation passed this session was a good step forward, said Sen. Dylan Roberts, a Democrat who sponsored several of the bills. The turf bill alone will save millions of gallons of water since

nearly half of municipal water is used to water lawns.

Lawmakers need to continue to pursue innovative solutions for the state's most critical resource, he said, even if it's not the flashiest policy topic.

Lawmakers in coming years should consider the creation of a statewide demand management program, which would pay water users to temporarily reduce the amount of water they consume, said Josh Kuhn, water campaign manager for Conservation Colorado.

Roberts remains disappointed that the Colorado River Drought Task Force, which convened last year, didn't make recommendations on such a program, but he hopes conversations will continue.

"I've always been of the mindset that there's no harm in preparing now and getting things ready for when we need them," Roberts said.

Water policy is complicated and can take years to develop, said Zane Kessler, director of government relations at the Colorado River District.

Everyone involved in Colorado water policy knows that more needs to be done in the face of a hotter, drier future, he said.

The 2024 legislative session was an attempt to rise to the occasion, Kessler said, and the results show that lawmakers and advocates can make progress through conversation and compromise.

"Sometimes these big hairy policy issues require time and conversation," he said. "It's impossible to go to a water conference without someone bringing up the adage: Whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting about. I just don't think that's true."

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