

Water And The West

Throughout the history of the American West, water issues have shown their ability to both unite and divide. KUER partners with KUNC and other news organizations throughout the Southwest to fully cover water issues in the sprawling Colorado River basin.

A 'snow drought' is leaving the West's mountains high and dry

KUNC | By Alex Hager

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*Alex Hager / KUNC*

Skiers cruise down the slopes at Arapahoe Basin ski area in Colorado on Nov. 13, 2023. Low precipitation has left much of the region in a "snow drought," which could have big implications for Colorado River water supply, but isn't expected to deal a financial blow to many ski resorts.

Across the West, the winter is off to a dry start. Wide swaths of the Rocky Mountains have lower-than-average snow totals for this time of year, but scientists say there's still plenty of time to end the "snow drought" and close the gap.

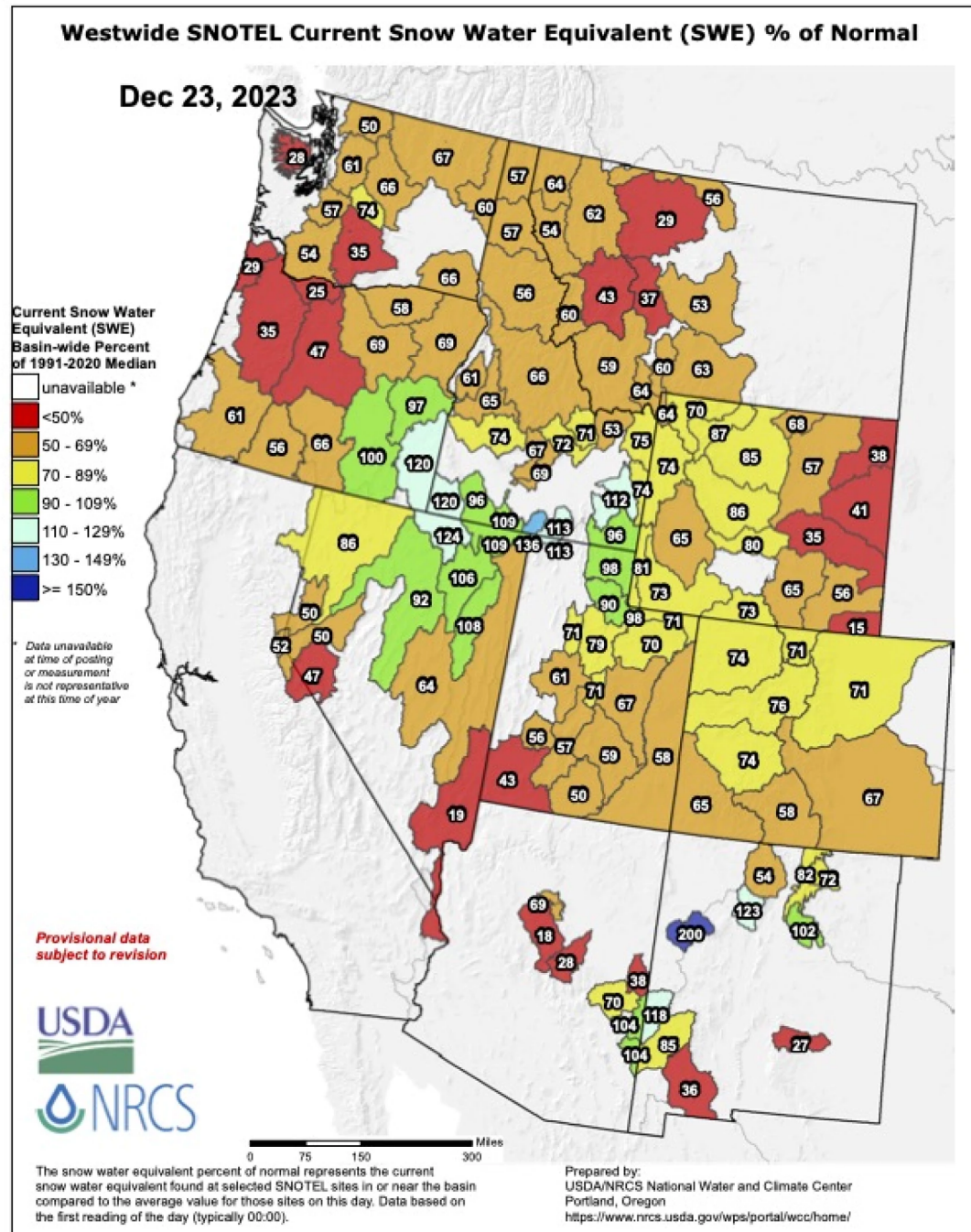
High-altitude snowpack has big implications for the region's water supply. Two-thirds of the Colorado River's water [starts as snow](#) in Colorado's mountains before

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Nearly every part of Colorado, Utah and Wyoming has significantly less snow than usual for late December. The [latest data](#) from a region-wide network of snow sensors shows snow in many areas with snow totals around 60 or 70% of normal.

"It's really going to be dependent on what we see in January and February," said Becky Bolinger, Colorado's assistant state climatologist. "We're really going to need an active January and February to make up these deficits and be okay."

Last year, big snows in the Rockies helped boost the Colorado River's major reservoirs. Policymakers said the snowy winter [lifted some pressure](#) off of tense negotiations about sharing the river's water in the future.



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This map shows snow totals as a percent of normal, and nearly every part of the Colorado River Basin has below-average snowpack data.

Even a few consecutive wet winters aren't enough to seriously fix the supply-demand imbalance that fuels the West's water crisis. More than 20 years of dry conditions, fueled by climate change, have shrunk the Colorado River's water supply, and policymakers have been [unable to agree](#) on significant, long-term cutbacks to water use.

Experts say it would take five or six consecutive above-average winters to close that supply-demand gap, which is unlikely to happen as climate change makes the region [warmer and drier](#).

Dan McEvoy, regional climatologist at the Western Regional Climate Center and Desert Research Institute, said last year's wet winter was an "anomaly."

"Lots of data, lots of research, projections, modeling, all point to this continuing trend of warmer winters, less snow and in some cases, less precipitation," he said.

Last year's snowy conditions did deliver one major positive for the Colorado River — soaking the soil and helping this year's snow reach the streams, rivers and reservoirs where people collect water. Dry soil [acts like a sponge](#) and soaks up runoff. After a high-snow winter, the soggy soil will help make sure a higher percentage of the next year's snowfall [reaches waterways](#).

Despite the low snow, ski resorts may not be feeling much financial pain. Chad Dyer, managing director of ski website OnTheSnow, said a lot of ski traffic around the holidays is coming from tourists who cemented their plans in advance.

"Their flights are booked, their lodging is booked. As long as the ski resort is open and has got a product, by and large, they're going to visit," Dyer said.

Dyer also pointed to statistics from a recent Vail Resorts [earnings call](#). The mountain ownership company said it expects 73% of its worldwide skier visits come from

to depend less on ticket sales that may ebb and flow with the quality of ski conditions.

The next few weeks are unlikely to bring much immediate relief for Western mountains.

"The medium- to long-range forecasts that go out about two weeks are not super promising," McEvoy said. "There are some signs of some smaller storms that can impact parts of the West. But overall, it's a pretty dry forecast."

This story is part of ongoing coverage of the Colorado River, produced by KUNC and supported by the Walton Family Foundation.

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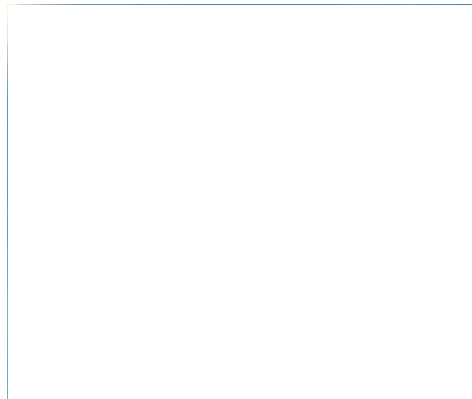
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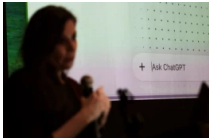
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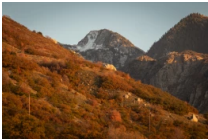


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