

Colorado River Negotiations – Moving Beyond Impasse

Growing Water Smart Network Webinar, July 16, 2026
Karen Schlatter, Director, Colorado Water Center



**COLORADO
WATER CENTER**
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Mission: Promote interdisciplinary research, drive educational programs, and facilitate stakeholder engagement to address complex water challenges by fostering collaboration, synthesizing water knowledge, and inspiring the next generation of water leaders

Connect.

Convene.

Catalyze.



**COLORADO
WATER CENTER**
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

“Why Colorado River negotiations stalled, and how they could resume with the possibility of agreement”

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigor, journalistic flair



Authors:

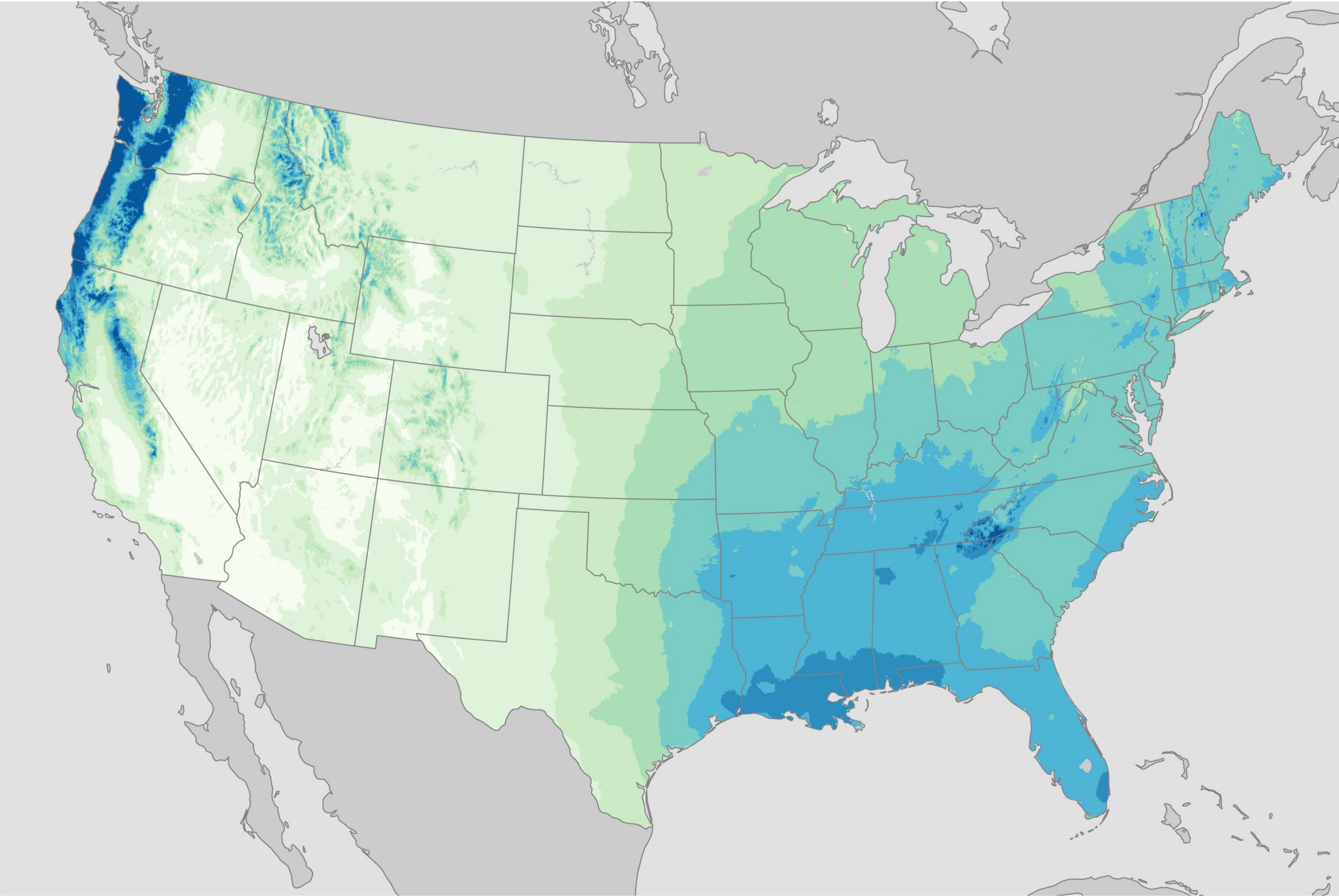
- Karen Schlatter, Director, Colorado Water Center, Colorado State University
- Sharon Megdal, Professor of Environmental Science and Director, Water Resources Research Center, University of Arizona

<https://theconversation.com/why-colorado-river-negotiations-stalled-and-how-they-could-resume-with-the-possibility-of-agreement-278029>

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/why-colorado-river-negotiations-stalled-and-how-they-could-restart>

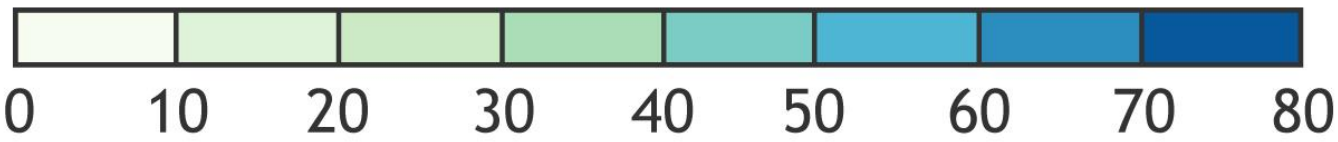


U.S. annual average precipitation (1991–2020)



1991–2020 Normals

Total precipitation (inches)



NOAA Climate.gov
Data: NCEI

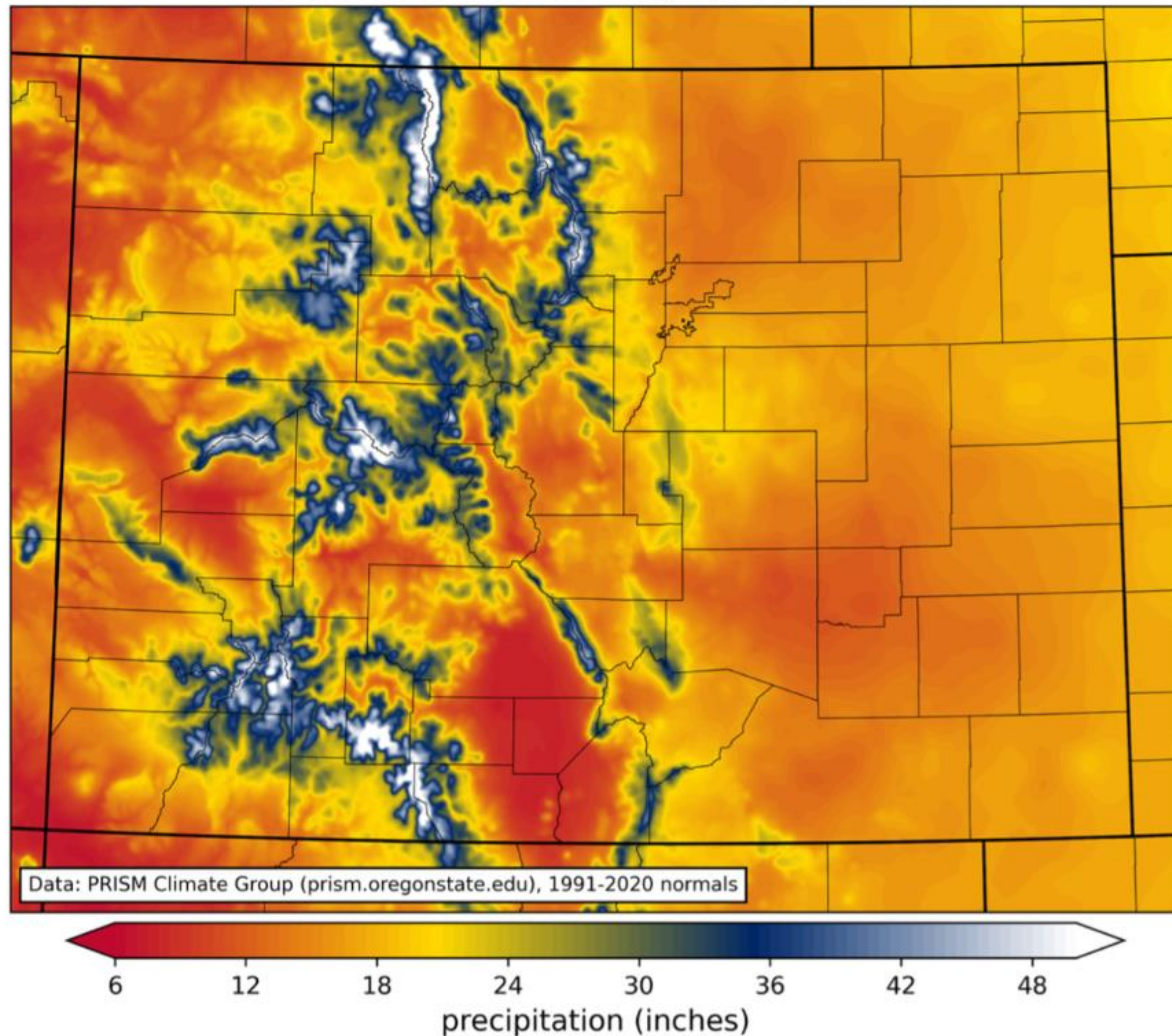
U.S. Annual Average Precipitation

1991–2020

NOAA Climate.gov



Colorado annual average precipitation



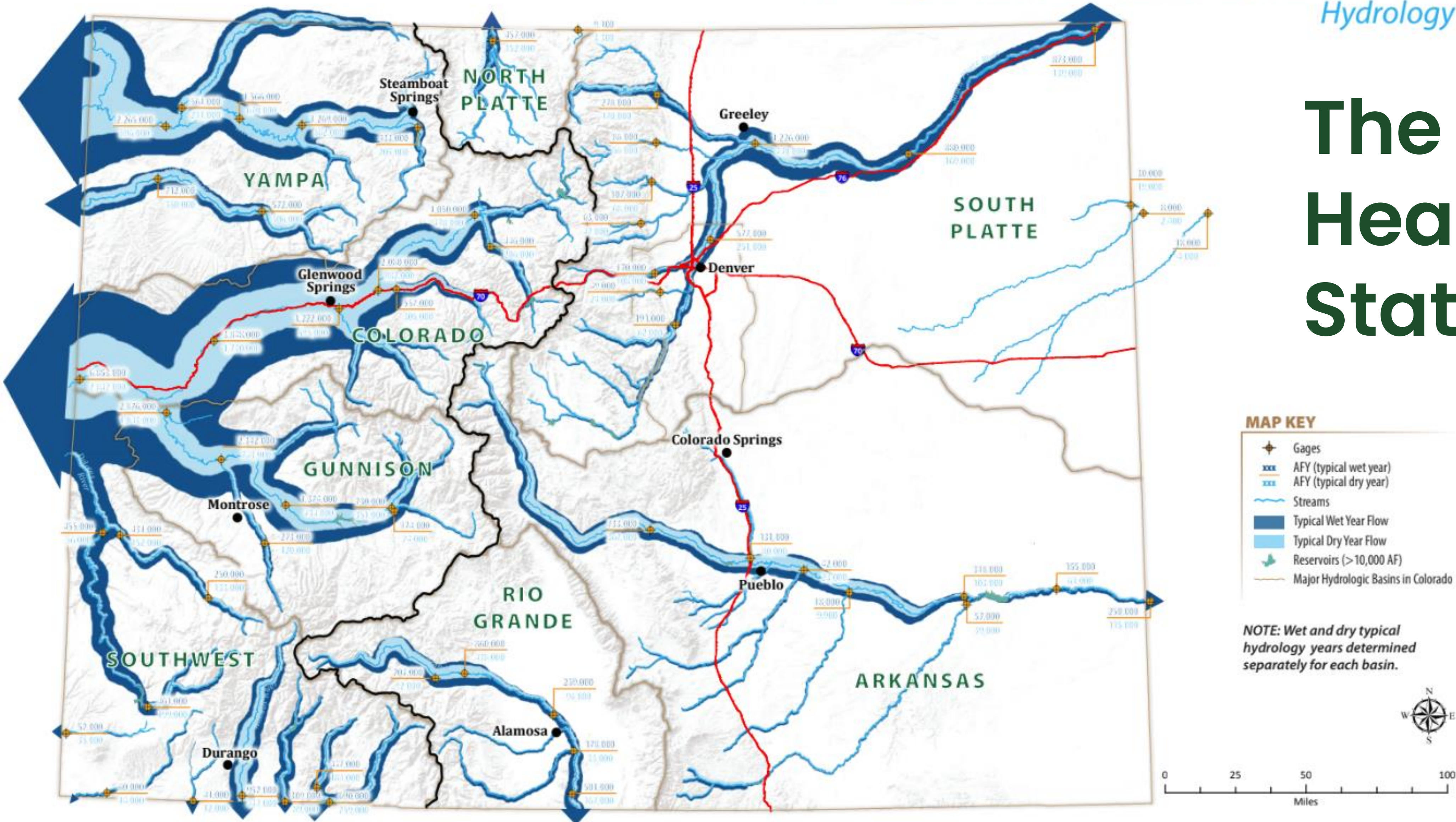
Colorado Annual Average Precipitation, 1991-2020

Source: <https://source.colostate.edu/colorado-record-low-snowpack/>





The Headwaters State



Water Management in Colorado

Agreements to share water with neighboring states through Compacts and Decrees

Compact/Decree	Year	States
Colorado River	1922	Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, California
Upper Colorado River	1948	Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico
Animas-La Plata Project	1969	New Mexico
La Plata River	1922	New Mexico
Rio Grande	1938	New Mexico, Texas
Costilla Creek	1944	New Mexico
Arkansas River	1948	Kansas
South Platte River	1923	Nebraska
Republican River	1942	Nebraska, Kansas
Laramie River (Decree)	1957	Wyoming
North Platte (Decree)	2001	Wyoming, Nebraska



The Colorado River Basin – Dividing the Waters

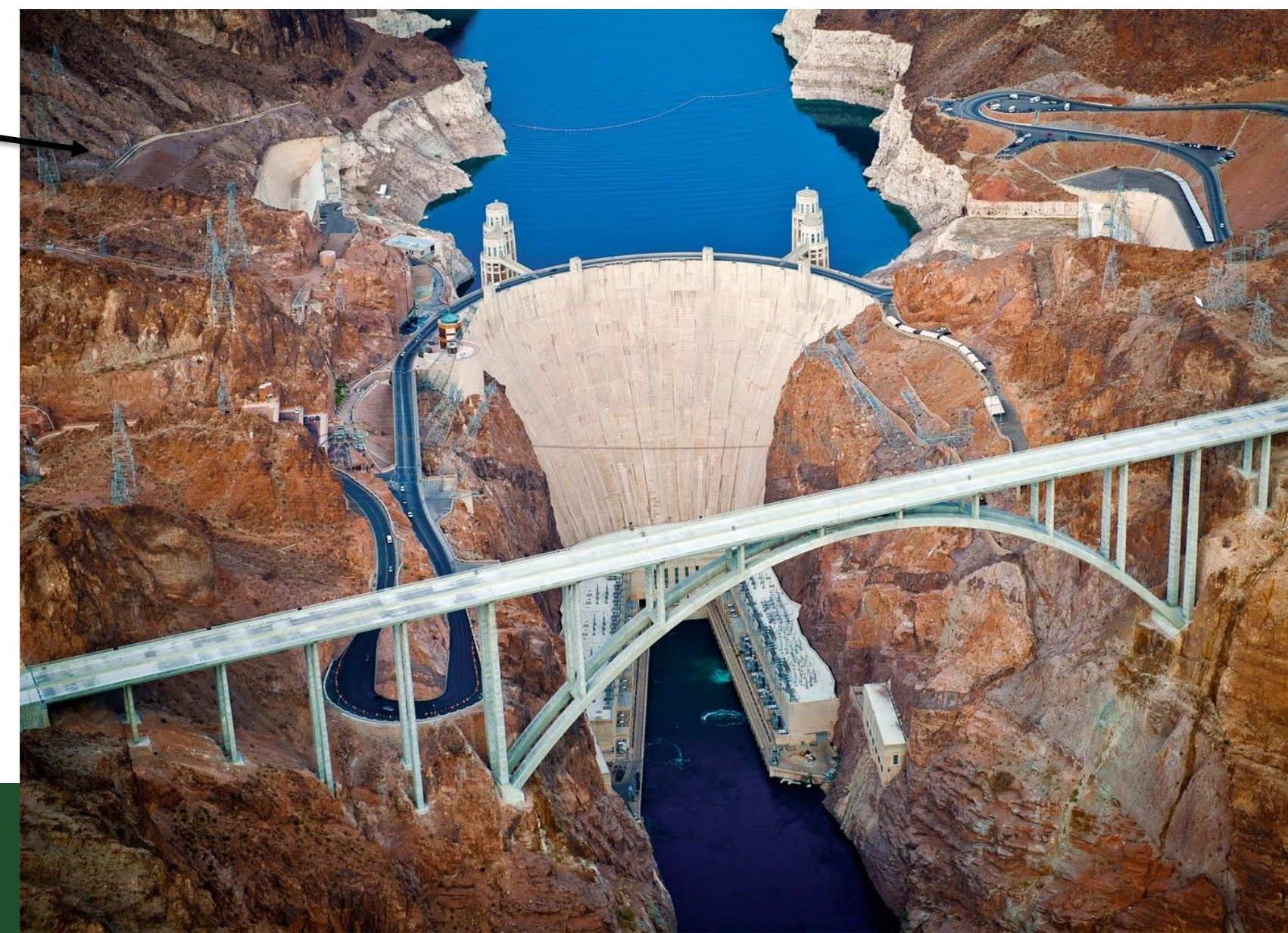
- 1922 Colorado River Compact
- 1948 Upper Colorado River Compact
- 1944 Treaty with Mexico



Colorado River Reservoirs



**Glen Canyon
Dam – Lake
Powell**



**Hoover Dam
– Lake Mead**



The Colorado River Basin

- ~40 million people depend on river for water, energy, agriculture and recreation
- Supports \$1.4 trillion in economic activity
- 7 states, 30 federally recognized tribal nations, and Mexico
 - Upper Basin states: Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico
 - Lower Basin states: Arizona, Nevada, California



The Colorado River Basin

- Flows since 2000 are 20% lower than average flows in previous century
- Reservoirs at historic lows – imminent danger of system crash
- Consistent over-use of water supply
- Unmet tribal water rights claims
- Power generation needs
- Environmental and recreational concerns

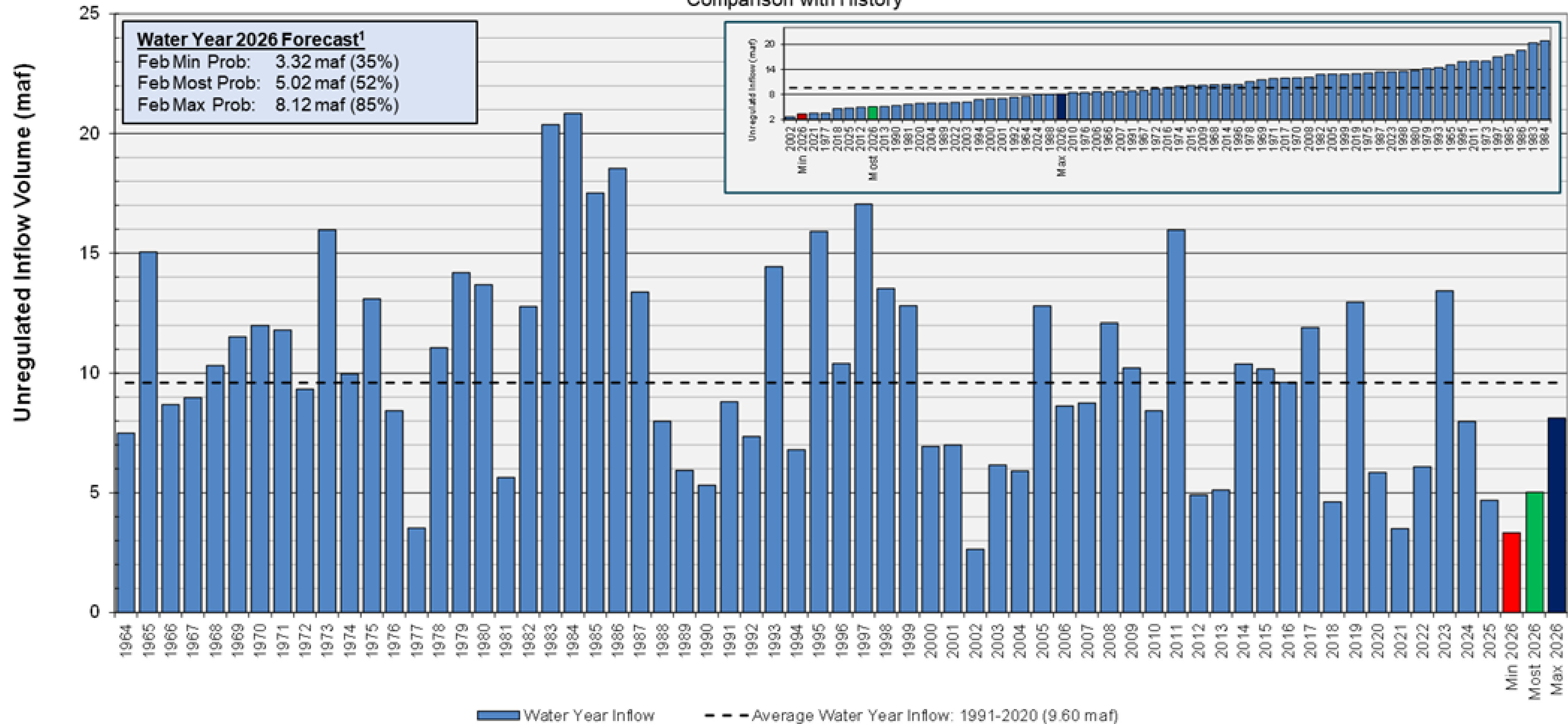


Declining CO River Flows

Lake Powell Water Year Unregulated Inflow

as of February 4, 2026

Comparison with History



Negotiations for Post 2026 Operations



Types of Conflict

Values	Data	Relationship	Interest	Structural
Core values	Lack of information	Troubled past histories	Competing needs of desires	Power imbalances
Worldview, beliefs, principles	Misinformation or disinformation	Strong negative emotions & projections	Psychological interests	Distribution of control of resources
Personal identity	Ideas of relevancy of data interpretation	Defensive or aggressive reactions	Motivations	Time, physical, or geographic constraints



Source: Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*; 2nd edition, 1996, pp. 60–61.

Colorado River Negotiations – Context

Values	Data	Relationship	Interest	Cultural
Core values	Lack of information	Troubled past histories	Competitive needs	Power imbalances
Worldview, beliefs, principles	Misinformation or disinformation	Strong negative emotions, projected	Psychological interests	Distribution of control of resources
Personal identity	Ideological relevancy, data interpretation	Defensive or aggressive reactions	Motivations	Time, physical, or geographic constraints

Source: Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*; 2nd edition, 1996, pp. 60–61.





The Role of a Facilitator/Mediator

- Provide unbiased support to advance discussions
 - Develop agendas, keep discussions on target
 - Develop transparent processes
 - Manage personalities and power imbalances; ensure various perspectives are included
- Help group find shared ground and common values, cultivate positive relationships in group
- Work towards agreements that all “can live with”



‘It’s past the eleventh hour’: Utah and other Colorado River states call for mediation as current plans near expiration

Negotiations over future plans for the Colorado River remain stalled as current guidelines near expiration.

The Salt Lake Tribune

Upper Colorado River states push for mediation on water cuts

Tony Davis Apr 26, 2026 Updated Apr 27, 2026

 **tucson.com**

Could a mediator help break the Colorado River deadlock? These states think so

KJZZ | By **Alex Hager**

Published April 24, 2026 at 5:02 PM MST



Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Operational Guidelines and Strategies for Lake Powell and Lake Mead



Draft
Environmental Impact
Statement

Post-2026 Operational
Guidelines and
Strategies for Lake
Powell and Lake Mead

Volume I

January 2026
U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
Upper and Lower Colorado Basins
Interior Regions 7 and 8



Five Alternative Actions:

1. No Action Alternative
2. Basic Coordination Alternative
3. Enhanced Coordination Alternative
4. Maximum Operational Flexibility Alternative (Cooperative Conservation Alternative)
5. Supply Driven Alternative



What's Next

- Bureau of Reclamation proposed 10-year plan that requires renegotiating reservoir operations every two years
- Reclamation will select an alternative scenario on Oct. 1
 - Will likely lead to litigation from states
 - Potential to end up in Supreme Court = decade(s)-long process
 - In the meantime, emergency management from year to year and extreme uncertainty for water managers
- Ideally, states could reach short-term agreement (2-3 years) to allow for more time for a longer-term agreement
 - Bring in facilitators/mediators to support process





Implications in Colorado

- No rules in place on how to cut back rights within Colorado
- Calls on Colorado rivers currently dating in the 1860–80 range (very senior rights)
 - Reduction in agricultural production → some producers and ranchers going out of business
- Continued uncertainty and risk in balancing water supply/demand
 - Regional water planning, scenario development, and management can help to ease uncertainty and risk



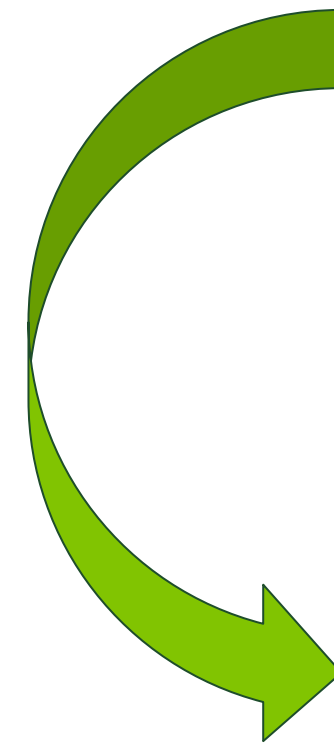
Thank you!

Karen.Schlatter@colostate.edu

watercenter.colostate.edu



**COLORADO
WATER CENTER**
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY



Sign up for our
e-newsletter,
The Current!

