

water woes

Lack of snowpack leaves the West hung out to dry

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By [Eric Holthaus](#) on Mar 13, 2018, *GRIST*



The lack of snow across the West this winter points to a parched summer ahead.

In California, Colorado, and across the Southwest, the snowfall has ranked among the lowest on record. The last four months have also been among the warmest throughout most of the region, according to a report out last week. Parts of eight states are [already under “extreme” drought conditions](#).

Snowy, chilly winters are critical when it comes to recharging the West’s mountain snowpack, the source of water for rivers and reservoirs during the increasingly long and hot summer days. Less snow in the mountains, in other words, means less water for everybody living below.

The evidence of dwindling snowpack is nearly everywhere you look. According to the latest information from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the period between Nov. 1 and Feb. 28 was at or near the [warmest](#) and [driest](#) on record for nearly every corner of the Southwest. In Arizona, the Navajo Nation has declared [a drought emergency](#), and farmers across the West are [preparing for a dry summer](#), contemplating killing livestock for fear they won't be able to feed them later this year. Last week, [a 23,000-acre wildfire](#) popped up near the Colorado-New Mexico border, a striking example of just how dry things are right now.

In California, statewide snowpack on March 1 rivaled the lowest ever measured, just [19 percent of normal](#). A series of big storms have since nudged that value to about [37 percent of normal](#) — a major win in a state where every drop counts. One problem, though: [New data](#) from the California's Water Resources Control Board show that people are using more water after last year's relatively good rains, as usage rates are back near where they were before the state's five-year drought. It seems that many Californians have already forgotten what they learned about how to save water.

Faith Kearns, a water scientist at the California Institute for Water Resources, says the state is already planning on varying levels of shortfalls this summer. "It's going to be another dry year," she says. "Our reservoirs are in decent shape from last year's storms, but we need to continue conserving."

It's clear that the West's steady and transformative slide into a drier future has already begun. This is just the start.