

Understanding the 'new normal' for water in the West

By Tara Lohan, Water Deeply

April is often a time of abundance in the mountains of the American West, when snowpack is at or near its peak, and forecasters work to determine how much runoff will course through our rivers and fill reservoirs later in the season.

This year, across much of the West, particularly the Southwest, there's little in the way of abundance. At Lake Powell, the second-largest reservoir in the West, runoff is predicted to be only 43 percent of average. Arizona is looking at one of its lowest runoff years in history. And in New Mexico, stretches of the Rio Grande have already run dry, months ahead of normal.

The only consolation is that last year was a wet year and reservoirs received a boost. While it's typical in the West to have big swings in precipitation from year to year, what has concerned scientists lately is that even good years are no longer producing the kind of runoff seen historically.

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