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HEAT WAVE

The Colorado River's problems are about to get deeper

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BY MARK GONGLOFF

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We live in an era of compounding climate disasters. Hurricanes lead to power failures that make heat waves more miserable. Heat waves harden the ground and make flooding worse. The Colorado River might be about to deliver the most complex multilevel train wreck of all.

The river, which serves 40 million people, has been losing water for decades as the planet has heated and those millions have used it too much. Then came this past winter, which was unusually warm in the mountains where the Colorado begins. That led to a perilous lack of snow in those mountains, meaning less water is available to melt into the river in spring and summer.

And now a heat wave quickly will do away with what little snow there is. As the icing on this many-tiered catastrophe cake, the states along the river are struggling to agree on how to divvy up a resource that has dwindled by 20% since the turn of the century. And the final arbiter in that fight might be a federal government that refuses to acknowledge climate change is even real. Without a realistic plan, the worst of this slow-motion disaster is yet to come.

Here's how the most recent stages of it have unfolded:

For vast swaths of the American West, the past winter was the hottest in at least 131 years of records, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Nine states, including the four in the upper Colorado River basin, experienced their hottest winters ever.

All that heat contributed to one of the worst snow droughts on record. Snowpack in those Upper Basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming was recently at just 59% of its 30-year average and the lowest in at least a decade, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data.

Lake Powell, the main reservoir near the border between the Upper Basin and Lower Basin, will get 52% of its usual inflow from snowmelt this year, the Bureau of Reclamation forecast.

Lake Powell can't afford an off year. It recently stood at just 24% of its capacity, 170 feet below "full pool" and just 160 feet from going "dead pool," when water can no longer escape from the Glen Canyon Dam. That would be a catastrophe for the Lower Basin states of Arizona, California and Nevada.

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More immediately, the reservoir is just 40 feet from "minimum power pool," below which it will be unable to move the turbines on Glen Canyon Dam's hydropower plant, which serves seven Western states. It generates 5 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity each year, enough to power 500,000 homes. A West filling up with data centers desperately needs this power supply.

Anyway, back to the main disaster. After some dry winters in the past, heavy snowfalls in the spring saved the Colorado's day by topping off the snowpack. It may not get so lucky this year. A freakish heat wave that has settled over the region in recent days will intensify and linger in the days ahead, likely smashing record temperatures for March.

That heat will evaporate and melt what little snow there is, not just in the upper Colorado basin but across the West. Snowpack in some places could disappear as early as April 1, far earlier than usual.

Of course, melted snow becomes water. But it won't be nearly enough to make up steep deficits in the Colorado and other sources. And much of it won't be captured by systems designed for slower snowmelts that once lasted for months. In the heat of summer, when farms, people, factories and data centers need that water the most, it won't be there.

This prospect adds urgency to the seemingly endless haggling among states along the river over a new agreement on sharing its water. Lower Basin states want Upper Basin ones to use less, and vice versa. Negotiators have missed deadline after deadline for reaching a deal. The Interior Department will have to step in at some point, but Lower Basin and Upper Basin states are united in disdain for the prescriptions it has proposed.

It's not comforting that Interior Secretary Doug Burgum routinely dismisses worries about climate change, cheerfully arguing that carbon dioxide emissions make plants grow. His agency has been one of President Donald Trump's main weapons in his crusade against clean energy and his effort to burn more of the fossil fuels heating the planet.

Climate change has made the West's recurring droughts and heat waves far more likely, a process that will intensify without efforts to keep the planet from heating more. That in turn will keep depriving the Colorado of rain and snowmelt in the future. No allocation of the river's future resources can succeed if it doesn't reckon with this fact. Meanwhile, states up and down the river must prepare for a future with much less water.

Incompetent leaders and shoddy infrastructure are force multipliers for natural disasters, often turning nuisance weather events into tragedies. Whether it comes to handling the climate or the Colorado, our leaders have failed to demonstrate much foresight. Discovering that quality now can make the Colorado's compounding disaster more manageable.

Mark Gongloff is a Bloomberg Opinion editor and columnist.