

# Get Wild: Big winters, bigger droughts

Staff



**A recent snowy Summit County scene, pictured here, bodes well for the ongoing drought, but it's hard to say how big an impact it will have in the long term.**

*Stasia Stockwell/Get Wild*

I recently went on a vacation for my mother's 60th birthday. Her requirements for where to go seemed simple: stateside, with sunshine and warm weather. This spring, that proved to be tougher than expected. My mom lives in northern Utah, and after a winter with record-breaking snowfall that won't quit, she was ready for a change.

Sonoma, our original plan, was being inundated with rain and flood warnings loomed. In a last-minute effort to find somewhere with a little sunshine, I began to search. Perhaps, I thought, she could just come visit Colorado. Breckenridge: 10 degrees and snowy. Salida: snow. What about Santa Fe? A winter storm warning was in effect. Let's go more south, I thought. Flagstaff: more snow, and that meant flooding for Sedona. We continued to trace the map south until we were nearly in Mexico. Tucson: sunny and 70s. So that's where we headed. We came to find out Tucson had actually received 3 inches of snow the week before we arrived, a rare occurrence for this city in nestled in the Sonoran Desert.

It's been a wet spring across the West, to say the least. California has been hit with over a dozen atmospheric rivers since December. Utah is having its snowiest winter on record, with Alta Ski Area's season totals sitting at a massive 824 inches as of Monday, April 3. At home in Colorado, we're sitting at 140% of average snowpack statewide (as of Tuesday, April 2), with southwest parts of the state nearing 200%. All this moisture is a welcome reprieve in the West, where drought persists. But is one wet winter enough to pull us out of this dry spell?

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We've been lingering in a megadrought for more than two decades now. Multiple years of warm temperatures and low precipitation levels have brought us here. Not only are our watersheds at dangerously low levels, but as this drought persists the soil becomes more arid. Another part of this mountain climate puzzle is not just how much snow we get, but also how quickly it melts. A big winter followed by a warm start to summer often means flooding and raging rivers. Not only do those things pose dangers on their own, but it's important for our mountain ecosystems for snow to stick around longer and melt more gradually. Snow insulates and helps with temperature regulation, and species like pika need those cooler temperatures to survive. Plus, if all that snow melts at once, that means

flows in late summer and fall are reduced. We humans need a steady flow of water for agricultural use and daily life rather than big bursts of lots of water.

What this all means is that one big winter won't solve the water issues in the West. But that doesn't mean it won't help. In California, while much of the state is still in severe drought, this exceptionally wet and deep winter has helped parts of the Sierra Nevada eke their way out of drought conditions, according to the LA Times. Utah's record snowfall is likely to give the Great Salt Lake a boost, but it won't ward off looming aridification. For Colorado, the above-average snowfall in parts of the state will help to fill watersheds that eventually flow into the struggling Colorado River. But a decent portion of the state, particularly the Arkansas Valley and along the Front Range, is still sitting at barely 100% of normal. All of us in the West should rejoice for this white whale of a winter — and hope for many, many more of them.

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