



## Phoenix and LA Spar Over Colorado River Water

Posted by [Jennifer Pitt](#) of [Environmental Defense Fund](#) in [Water Currents](#) on March 20, 2013

In a recent volley between Phoenix and Los Angeles, newspapers in those two arid cities pointed fingers at each other over who has the least sustainable water supply.

In the [L.A. Times](#), opinion writer William deBuys asserted:

*If cities were stocks, you'd want to short Phoenix. Of course, it's an easy city to pick on. The nation's 13th-largest metropolitan area crams 4.3 million people into a low bowl in a hot desert, where horrific heat waves and windstorms visit it regularly. And it depends on an improbable infrastructure to suck water from the distant (and dwindling) Colorado River.*



Lake Mead is low again now, as it was in 2008, when this picture was taken. Photo: Kim Ballantyne, My Shot

The editorial staff at the [Arizona Republic](#) did not take kindly to this criticism, and quickly pointed out in response that those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones:

*Certainly L.A. is probably the most effective city, community, maybe in the world, at stealing other people's water and sucking other communities dry...If residents of LA wish to behold the embodiment of "unsustainable," they merely need to look down, not 350 miles east.*

In fact both metro areas rely heavily on imports from the Colorado, moving water hundreds of miles from the river to quench their thirsts. The canals they built are feats of engineering, and the transport of water in both cases requires significant – and expensive – energy expenditures.

### **It Goes Beyond LA and Phoenix**

But deBuys made a more important point. Given how we manage the Colorado River today, all water users face significant risk of shortages:

*Beset by climate change, overuse and drought, the river and its reservoirs, according to various researchers, may decline to the point that water fails to pass Hoover Dam. In that case, the CAP system would dry up, but so would the Colorado Aqueduct, which serves greater Los Angeles and San Diego, as well as the All-American Canal, on which the factory farms of California's Imperial and Coachella valleys depend.*

Even the federal government's recently published [Colorado River Basin Study](#) projected the impact of climate change means a 10% probability that 25 years from now Lake Mead would hold so little water it would not be capable of making releases to any water users downstream. That's frightening, and should be viewed as an urgent call to action that the basin's water users need to start changing their ways immediately.

Some of the Colorado Basin's water leaders have started to beat the drum for new operating rules that would aim to prevent such untenable conditions, but there's no consensus yet on a management approach, or even that action is necessary.

### **Blue Solutions**

The good news is that there is plenty that can be done under today's rules to make Colorado River water use more sustainable. The first thing that all water users – including Los Angeles and Phoenix – can do is increase water conservation so they can reduce the amount of water they take from Lake Mead. In 2007 the Lower Basin (including Phoenix and Los Angeles) established [new rules that allow water users to store conserved water in Lake Mead for future use](#).

It would be prudent for Lower Basin water users to make aggressive new efforts to save water, as Lake Mead hovers around half empty, a full ten feet lower than it was at this time last year, and with so little snow in the mountains that projected runoff into the Colorado's big reservoirs for this year is only 49% of "normal" (whatever that means anymore).

The regional water agencies that supply Los Angeles and Phoenix have demonstrated they can use the 2007 rules to store water in Lake Mead for future use. One way they can act now to forestall the looming crisis of water shortages is to encourage their customers to conserve water, and then store that water for the future in Lake Mead. Some communities in both the Phoenix and Los Angeles metropolitan areas have already made great strides in reducing their water use, demonstrating that water conservation is possible. The regional water suppliers who serve Phoenix and Los Angeles should be holding them up as examples and finding incentives for the rest of their service areas to follow in their footsteps.

Instead of trading barbs over who is the least sustainable, perhaps the *L.A. Times* and the *Arizona Republic* should be demanding action at home.

<http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2013/03/20/phoenix-and-la-spar-over-colorado-river-water/>