

The New York Times

**Green**

A Blog About Energy and the Environment

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JULY 20, 2012, 12:31 PM

## Southwestern Drought, in Fact and Film

By [FELICITY BARRINGER](#)

Like the actors in "A Chorus Line," different regions of the United States have had their moments in the spotlight as droughts gave them stories to tell. Last year it was the Deep South and especially Texas and Oklahoma.

As a 50-year [chart](#) by my colleagues Haeyoun Park and Kevin Quealy reflects, this year unusually large swaths of the country, from New England through the Midwest and into the Plains, are watching crops droop.

But in the Southwest, drought has been the norm since 1999. The only year since then that the federal government's [Palmer Drought Severity Index](#) has not registered dryer-than-normal conditions there was 2006.

Yet last year, as the rain deficit continued on the Southwest, copious winter snows in Colorado and Wyoming led to a substantial [">increase](#) in water flowing through the Colorado River system to Lake Powell, the reservoir on the Arizona-Utah border that feeds Lake Mead and the tens of millions of Californians and Arizonans who depend on it.

This year, the prevailing pattern of the last decade has starkly reasserted itself: the [rate](#) at which water flowed into Lake Powell, the Upper Colorado River and all its tributaries in the high-flow months of April, May and June was, at best, less than a quarter of last year's generous inflows and barely one-third of those in 2008, 2009 and 2010. And those were dry years.

Still, the glut of water in 2011 is to some extent masking the dearth of water in 2012. Bruce Williams, a river operations group manager at the Bureau of Reclamation's [Lower Colorado Region](#), says despite this year's paltry inflows, the lower river system's stored water filled little more than than 60 percent of the total storage capacity until recently. Now it's dropping to the decades-long average of around 50 percent.

Given this year's dryness, that savings account is likely to be drawn down fast. Water managers anticipate this year's exports from Lake Powell to Lake Mead will be down 25 percent from last year's.

By 2013, the amount is expected to drop further; a recent [article](#) in The San Diego Union-Tribune accompanied by a detailed [graphic presentation](#) explains the causes and consequences for that region.

The problems of water supplies in general, and Colorado River supplies in particular, have also been the focus of a stream of books and documentary movies over the past three years. Their themes, like the Southwestern drought itself, tend to be familiar.

Jonathan Waterman's 2010 book "[Running Dry](#)," for instance, had echoes of Philip Fradkin's "[A River No More](#)," first published in 1996. Both focused on the discrepancy between the withdrawals of water allowed by law and the decreasing amount of water provided by nature. Both focus on the reality that the Colorado River is so overused that it dries up miles before it can reach the ancient river delta on the Gulf of California in Mexico.

Now comes a new documentary from the Redford Institute in Utah. Called "[Watershed](#)," it is produced by James Redford, son of the actor Robert Redford, and its retelling of the life and times of the modern Colorado River comes with a different accent. It isn't that the film is upbeat; it would be hard for any documentary about this overused watershed to do that and remain factual.

But "[Watershed](#)" works at being uplifting; unlike Jessica Yu's "[Last Call at the Oasis](#)," a [well-reviewed](#) documentary about American and global water woes that features half a dozen experts with many academic degrees to their names, it portrays people like a bike messenger from Los Angeles, an environmentally conscious rancher in southwestern Colorado, and a bunch of students on an Outward Bound rafting trip on the Green River, the Colorado's major tributary.

It also offers viewers a chance to do something. Not just to conserve water, but to be part of an effort to restore enough flow to Mexico that the Colorado can reach the sea again. To that end, James Redford said in an interview, a major nonprofit -- details remain under wraps -- will be the repository for money to further that cause. The money would be used to buy and retire water rights from some of the many claimants along the lower Colorado River.

"We are asking for that pledge and hope people take it seriously," he said. "We're going to try to return that water to where it belongs, in the Delta."