



Climate Change in Colorado

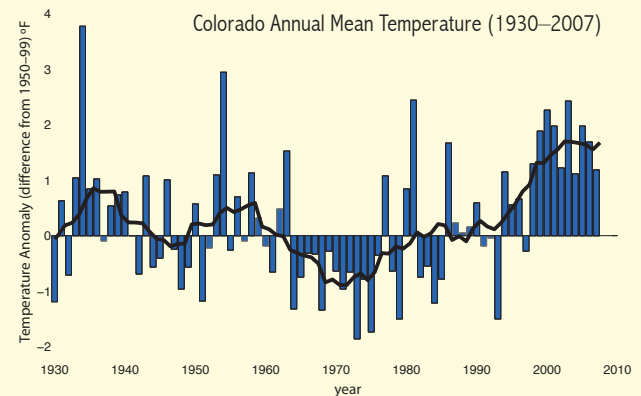
A Synthesis to Support Water Resources Management and Adaptation

A REPORT FOR THE COLORADO WATER CONSERVATION BOARD

THE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE IS CLEAR: THE EARTH'S CLIMATE IS WARMING. MULTIPLE INDEPENDENT MEASUREMENTS CONFIRM WIDESPREAD WARMING IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES.

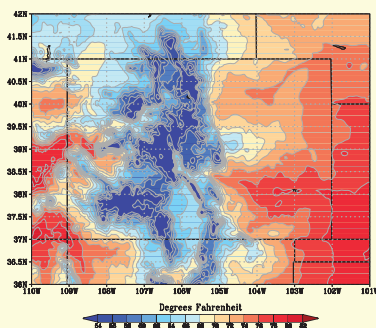
IN COLORADO, TEMPERATURES HAVE INCREASED BY APPROXIMATELY 2°F BETWEEN 1977 AND 2006. INCREASING TEMPERATURES ARE AFFECTING THE STATE'S WATER RESOURCES.

The Colorado Climate Report is a synthesis of climate change science important for Colorado's water supply. It focuses on observed trends, modeling, and projections of temperature, precipitation, snowmelt, and runoff. The report summarizes Colorado-specific findings from peer-reviewed regional studies, and presents new graphics derived from existing datasets. The state is home to many experts in climate and hydrology, and this report also draws from ongoing work by these scientists.



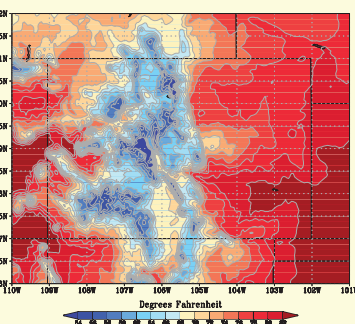
CHANGES IN THE WATER CYCLE WILL BE THE DELIVERY MECHANISM FOR MANY IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE.

July Annual Average Temperature (1950–99)



Climate models project Colorado will warm by 2.5°F by 2025 and 4°F by 2050, relative to the 1950–99 baseline.

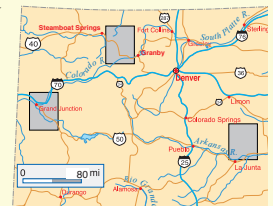
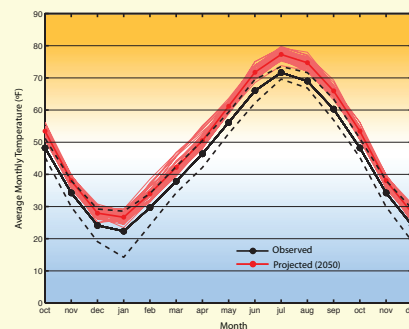
July Annual Average Temperature (2050)



Mid-21st century summer temperatures on the Eastern Plains of Colorado are projected to shift west-ward and upslope, bringing into the Front Range temperature regimes that today occur near the Kansas border.

Summers are projected to warm more than winters. Projections suggest that typical summer monthly temperatures will be as warm or warmer than the hottest 10% of summers that occurred between 1950 and 1999.

Monthly Temperature near Grand Junction, CO

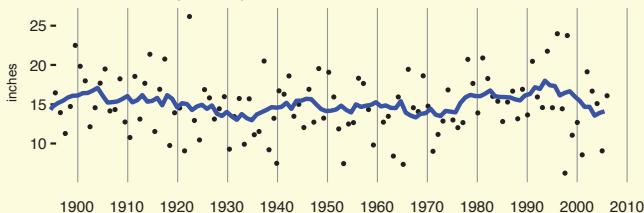


Locations of Temperature and Precipitation Projections

Monthly Projections are included in the Report for areas around Grand Junction, Steamboat Springs and La Junta.

CHANGES IN THE QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF WATER MAY OCCUR DUE TO WARMING EVEN IN THE ABSENCE OF PRECIPITATION CHANGES.

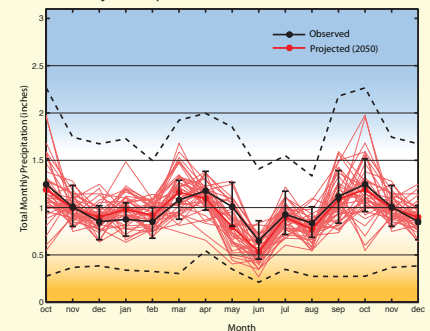
Annual Average Precipitation: Fort Collins



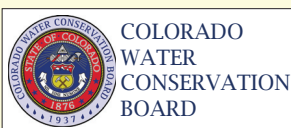
In all parts of Colorado, no consistent long-term trends in annual precipitation have been detected. Variability is high, which makes detection of trends difficult.

Climate model projections do not agree whether annual mean precipitation will increase or decrease by 2050.

Monthly Precipitation near Grand Junction, CO



A SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS IN THIS REPORT SUGGESTS A REDUCTION IN TOTAL WATER SUPPLY BY THE MID-21ST CENTURY.



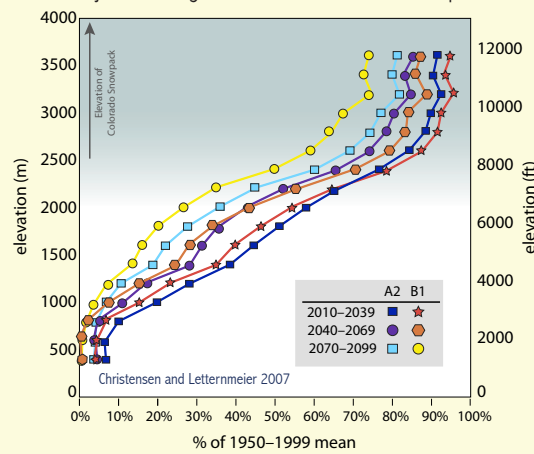
To download the full report:
wwa.colorado.edu/CO_Climate_Report/index.html

The Report is divided in six sections and includes an Executive Summary, Glossary, List of Resources. An online Appendix is also available (www.colorado.edu).

Also included in the Report is an overview of climate models that focuses on how climate projections are developed. This section is intended to provide background for the reader about the theories behind model development, and the relationship among scenarios, models, and climate projections.

Global climate models do not represent the complexity of Colorado's topography. Researchers use techniques such as "down-scaling" to study processes that matter to Colorado water resource managers. Several projects are underway to improve regional models.

Projected Change in Colorado River Basin Snowpack



SNOWPACK

Most of the reduction in snowpack in the West has occurred below about 8200 ft. However, most of Colorado's snowpack is above this elevation, where winter temperatures remain well below freezing.

Projections show a precipitous decline in lower-elevation (below 8200 ft) snowpack across the West by the mid-21st century. Modest declines are projected (10–20%) for Colorado's high-elevation (above 8200 ft) snowpack.

CLIMATE CHANGE WILL AFFECT COLORADO'S USE AND DISTRIBUTION OF WATER. WATER MANAGERS AND PLANNERS CURRENTLY FACE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES THAT MAY BE FURTHER EXACERBATED BY PROJECTED CLIMATE CHANGE.

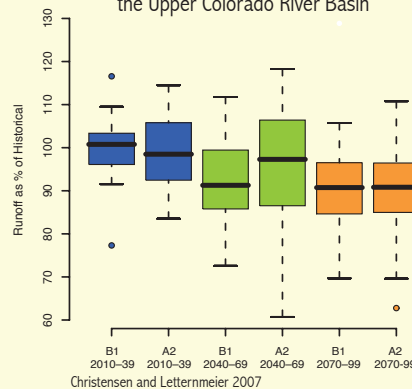
RUNOFF

Between 1978 and 2004, the spring pulse (the onset of streamflows from melting snow) in Colorado has shifted earlier by two weeks. Several studies suggest that shifts in timing and intensity of streamflows are related to warming spring temperatures. The timing of runoff is projected to shift earlier in the spring, and late-summer flows may be reduced.

Recent hydrology projections suggest declining runoff for most of Colorado's river basins in the 21st century. However, the impact of climate change on runoff in the Rio Grande, Platte, and Arkansas Basins has not been studied as extensively as the Colorado River Basin.

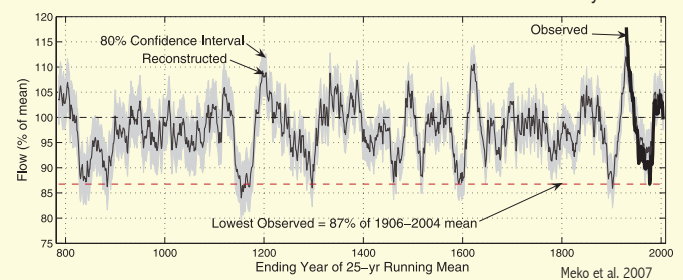
For the Upper Colorado River Basin, multi-model average projections suggest decreases in runoff ranging from 6% to 20% by 2050 compared to the 20th century average, although one statistical streamflow model projects a 45% decline by 2050.

Range of Runoff Projections for the Upper Colorado River Basin



DROUGHT

Reconstructed Streamflow for the Colorado River at Lees Ferry



Throughout the West, less frequent and less severe drought conditions have occurred during the 20th century than revealed in the paleoclimate records over the last 1000 years.

Precipitation variations are the main driver of drought in Colorado and low Lake Powell inflows, including the drought of 2000–07, and these variations are consistent with the natural variability observed in long-term and paleoclimate records.

However, warming temperatures may have increased the severity of droughts and exacerbated drought impacts.

IMPLICATIONS

Issues	Observed and/or Projected Change
Water demands for agriculture and outdoor watering	Increasing temperatures raise evapotranspiration by plants, lower soil moisture, alter growing seasons, and thus increase water demand.
Water supply infrastructure	Changes in snowpack, streamflow timing, and hydrograph evolution may affect reservoir operations including flood control and storage. Changes in the timing and magnitude of runoff may affect functioning of diversion, storage, and conveyance structures.
Legal water systems	Earlier runoff may complicate prior appropriation systems and interstate water compacts, affecting which rights holders receive water and operations plans for reservoirs.
Water quality	Although other factors have a large impact, "water quality is sensitive both to increased water temperatures and changes in patterns of precipitation" (CCSP SAP 4.3, p. 149). For example, changes in the timing and hydrograph may affect sediment load and pollution, impacting human health.
Energy demand and operating costs	Warmer air temperatures may place higher demands on hydropower reservoirs for peaking power. Warmer lake and stream temperatures may affect water use by cooling power plants and in other industries.
Mountain habitats	Increasing temperature and soil moisture changes may shift mountain habitats toward higher elevation.
Interplay among forests, hydrology, wildfires, and pests	Changes in air, water, and soil temperatures may affect the relationships between forests, surface and ground water, wildfire, and insect pests. Water-stressed trees, for example, may be more vulnerable to pests.
Riparian habitats and fisheries	Stream temperatures are expected to increase as the climate warms, which could have direct and indirect effects on aquatic ecosystems (CCSP SAP 4.3), including the spread of in-stream non-native species and diseases to higher elevations, and the potential for non-native plant species to invade riparian areas. Changes in streamflow intensity and timing may also affect riparian ecosystems.
Water- and snow-based recreation	Changes in reservoir storage affect lake and river recreation activities; changes in streamflow intensity and timing will continue to affect rafting directly and trout fishing indirectly. Changes in the character and timing of snowpack and the ratio of snowfall to rainfall will continue to influence winter recreational activities and tourism.
Groundwater resources	Changes in long-term precipitation and soil moisture can affect groundwater recharge rates; coupled with demand issues, this may mean greater pressures on groundwater resources.