

STATE OF COLORADO

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New State Drought Plan Approved

Plan provides earlier drought warnings, new tools for local communities

GRAND JUNCTION, CO - The Colorado Water Conservation Board approved a new blueprint to help guide Colorado's response to the next drought at its September board meeting in Grand Junction yesterday.

The 2010 Drought Mitigation and Response Plan is designed to give water planners state-of-the-art tools and techniques to prepare for and respond to severe drought events. The 2010 plan updates the previous statewide drought plans and incorporates a new vulnerability assessment to flag potential problem areas.

"This new drought plan will help us evaluate how a drought could impact the various sectors of our economy down to the county level," said CWCB director Jennifer Gimbel. "That's a powerful tool we haven't had before and it will aid in the development of drought planning to safeguard the assets most important to each region."

Building off the work done for the Colorado River Water Availability Study, the 2010 Drought Mitigation and Response Plan also examines how changes in our climate can influence the duration and frequency of drought. Colorado is one of the first states in the nation to look both qualitatively and quantitatively at drought vulnerability.

"Colorado is once again leading the West and the nation with innovative approaches to drought preparedness," said Dr. Michael J. Hayes of the National Drought Mitigation Center. "In a state where at least one region experiences drought nearly every year, this work will help protect the citizens, environment and economy of Colorado."

Revising the Drought Response and Mitigation Plan is required to maintain Colorado's eligibility for disaster relief funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and is part of the state's preparation of the broader Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan.

The revision streamlines the state's drought response process by identifying a step-by-step procedure to respond to drought and identify mitigation efforts to reduce drought impacts.

A key new feature is a groundbreaking vulnerability assessment that examines various economic sectors which would be affected by a statewide drought such as recreation, the environment, agriculture and energy. The vulnerability assessment considers potential impacts of a water shortage along with each county's ability to respond.

Among the findings, the assessment determined that agriculture on the eastern plains is more vulnerable to drought impacts than West Slope agriculture. On the other hand, tourism and recreation businesses in Colorado's northwest are more likely to feel drought impacts than in other parts of the state.

The plan also looks at the state's own assets, such as state parks, wildlife and State Land Board lands, to assess their vulnerability to drought.

In addition, the Drought Mitigation and Response Plan relies on up-to-date techniques for monitoring drought and drought indices, such as the Surface Water Supply Index, to provide greater precision in assessing drought status.

"This is the first step in the development of a drought early warning system in Colorado," said state climatologist Nolan Doesken. "This system will help us identify potential impacts earlier, so we have more time to make smart decisions about how to respond."

The plan now goes to the Colorado Division of Emergency Management for incorporation into the State's Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan, which will be submitted to the Governor and FEMA for further approval.

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On the Web:

<http://cwcb.state.co.us/water-management/drought>