

# Cities, states, farms at odds over rights to dwindling Colorado River

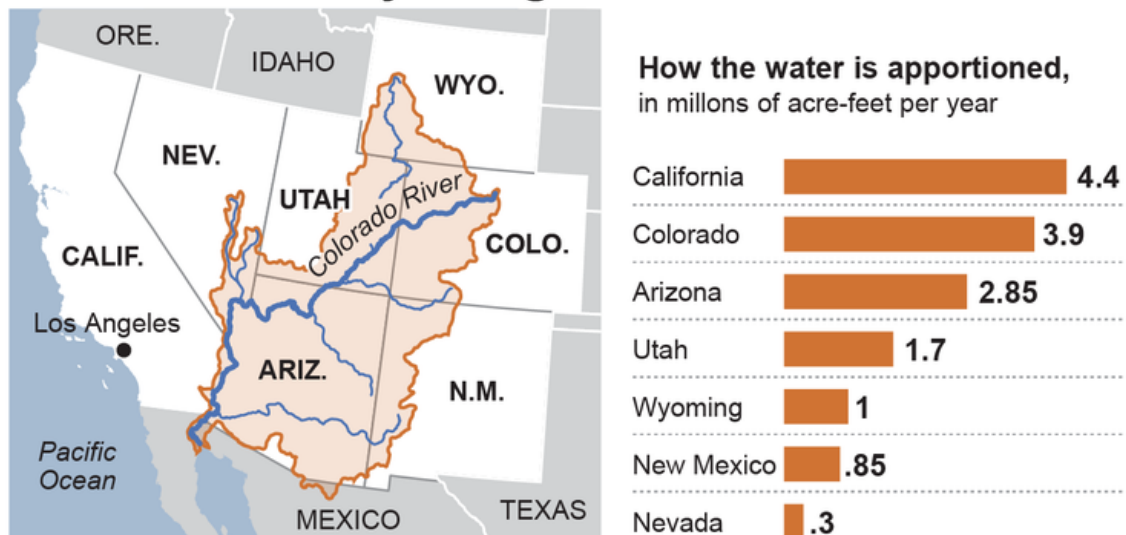
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Pedro Figueroa irrigates a cotton field in Yuma, Arizona, in the spring. Seven states depend on water from the Colorado River, and a debate is brewing over the future of water rights. Photo: Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times/TNS

## Colorado River hydrologic basin



Sources: Columbia University, So. Nevada Water Authority

Lou Spirito / @latimesgraphics

YUMA, Ariz. — The Colorado River begins as snow in the Rocky Mountains and ends 1,450 miles south in Mexico. Along the way, it carries water for the farm fields that grow most of the greens Americans eat in the winter. If you eat a salad between Thanksgiving and April, the odds are good that some of it was grown in Yuma.

The river shows how tough it is to manage the need for water in the Southwest. The Colorado is suffering from a historic drought that has made clear that the region cannot keep depending on one source of water.

Almost 40 million people in seven states depend on the Colorado for their water, and their population could double in the next 50 years. After 16 years of drought, it's become clear that the Colorado cannot meet the needs for long. Government officials say water shortages will force them to cut back the water supply to parts of the area in the future.

Arizona would suffer the worst if the drought continues. Farmers in central Arizona could be forced to let fields go. Cities like Phoenix might have to begin reusing wastewater and even put limits on new building, which has helped create jobs in the state.

## **To Thrive Or To Die**

In Yuma, there may be no cuts at all. Thanks to the complicated rules on water use, much of Phoenix could become a ghost town while Yuma keeps planting lettuce in the desert.

The shortages have opened a touchy new conversation about the way Arizona divides the water it shares with six states, including California. Some experts say people should come first, before leafy greens. That kind of talk rattles the farmers in Yuma. They know they have rights to the water but not necessarily support from political leaders.

"They believe there's a target on their backs," said Tom Buschatzke, who leads the Arizona Department of Water Resources. "I believe they're right."

Farmers here do not intend to go quietly. Some come from families that were here when the big cities of the modern Southwest were little more than crossroads.

## **Farmers Staunch About Their Water Rights**

"We have a legal right to this," said Mark Smith, who farms about 500 acres in Yuma and leads 1 of 6 irrigation districts in the area. "The guys who say this is an easy fix — it's not an easy fix. We're growing vital crops."

"This is a national debate," Smith added, "because we're supplying the entire nation."

Few rivers work as hard as the Colorado. It serves ranchers in western Colorado and Denver and its suburbs. Las Vegas and other southern Nevada communities draw up to 90 percent of their water from the river and the Hoover Dam turns its flow into electricity. After Arizona and California take their share, the river exits to the sea in the Gulf of California.

California would not face any immediate cutbacks, thanks to an agreement it reached with Arizona in 1968. That agreement also ensured that much of Arizona would take steep cuts, but Yuma is an exception.

### **Older Rights Mean More Water**

Farms in Yuma have been drawing water from the Colorado since the late 1800s. They have the oldest water rights in Arizona and that gives them the right to more water than Phoenix and Tucson. California has rights to the largest share, and even in the worst case, it will always get its share. All sides know they have to work together. They fear the alternative is that the federal government will step in and make a decision.

Farmers in Yuma argue that the region has reduced its water use over the last four decades. The farmers also say cities have been allowed to grow without worrying about the water they will need.

The farmers are doing many things right, said Robert Glennon, a law professor at the University of Arizona. But he also warned that they may have only so much control over their fate. Farmers in California who depend on other rivers are learning the same lesson during the historic drought there, he said. Glennon has encouraged farmers to grow fewer crops so they can sell part of the rights to their water back to the cities.

### **Yuma's Settlers Motivated By Serving The Nation**

Farmers in Yuma say the settlers in the region believed in national service. The government began building canals early in the 20th century to take the Colorado's water to the farms.

Edward C. Cuming was an Irishman who moved to Canada before he arrived in Yuma in 1902. He homesteaded 160 acres just south of Yuma, watering them with the new canals. During the Great Depression, when many jobs were lost, the federal government planned large projects to create jobs, including the canals across Yuma. One of them, stamped "CCC 1940," is known as the Cuming Canal. The canal still runs directly in front of fields now owned by Edward Cuming's grandson, Jim Cuming.

"When we had an abundant supply of water, the farmer was doing a great job," Cuming said. "Now all of a sudden he's a villain because he uses too much to produce your fruit and fiber."