



Water

“Population growth is the elephant in the room, not just in the water crisis but every environmental problem. You can't name one that doesn't come down to the fact that there's too many of us....Immigration is part of population growth and our national immigration policy is in dire need of reform. Everyone in the country understands that. And when we look forward we should also be facing the question of the numbers of people, not just who gets in.” - [Professor Robert Glennon](#), author of *Unquenchable: America's Water Crisis and What To Do About It*¹

The United States is comparatively well endowed with water resources...

- 70 percent of America's [freshwater supply](#) is from surface water sources; 30 percent from groundwater.²
- The U.S. withdraws about 400 billion gallons of water a day for all uses.
- 80 percent of [water withdrawals](#) are for agriculture. 10 percent is for thermoelectric power and public use.
- Total water use has decreased in recent decades, even as the U.S. grew by tens of millions of people.
- A stable population would allow still more water to remain where it longs — in natural streams, rivers, and lakes — where it furnishes ecological benefits to habitat, wildlife, and society.

...but American groundwater is being depleted faster than it can be replenished.

- Roughly 40 percent of wells have hit [all-time lows](#) since 2010.³

¹ Glennon, from “The Drying of America: Too many people, too little water,” To The Contrary with Bonnie Erbe, PBS, April 25, 2014. <https://www.pbs.org/to-the-contrary/watch/3019/drought-the-drying-of-america>

² U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), “Surface Water Use In The United States,” 2018. <https://www.usgs.gov/special-topics/water-science-school/science/surface-water-use-united-states>

³ Mira Rojanasakul, Christopher Flavelle, Blacki Migliozi and Eli Murray “America Is Using Up Its Groundwater Like There's No Tomorrow,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/28/climate/groundwater-drying-climate-change.html>

- Industrial farming and sprawling cities are depleting aquifers that will take hundreds or thousands of years to replenish.⁴

Population growth is colliding with a megadrought in the Southwest.

Population growth increases the number of "straws" (or pipes and pumps) pulling from a diminishing pool of water. Growing demands are being placed on a shrinking resource.

- The Colorado River's flow decreased by an estimated 20 percent over the past century.
- Lake Mead dropped to the lowest it has been in 84 years in 2021; 36% of its capacity.
- The federal government's [Fourth National Climate Assessment](#) indicates droughts of increased duration and severity throughout the rest of this century.⁵
- The seven states that signed the Colorado River Compact in 1922 had a combined population of [2.8 million in 1900](#).⁶ Their combined populations today [exceed 62 million](#).⁷
- U.S. population will continue to [grow by tens of millions](#) every decade to surpass 400 million by 2060.⁸ The Southwest is projected to be one of the fastest growing regions over that period.
- Without changes to immigration policy, arid regions throughout the West will have millions more people, fewer farms, more expensive water, devastated riverine ecosystems, and an increasingly parched landscape.

The Southeast is also anticipated to experience water supply problems.

According to the 2014 National Climate Assessment is: "Decreased water availability, exacerbated by population growth and land-use change, will continue to increase competition for water and affect the region's economy and unique ecosystems."⁹

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gonzalez et al. 2018. Southwest. Chapter 25 in Fourth National Climate Assessment. U.S. Global Change Research Program. <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/chapter/25/>

⁶ Kathleene Parker, "Population, Immigration, and the Drying of the American Southwest," Center for Immigration Studies, 2010. <https://cis.org/Population-Immigration-and-Drying-American-Southwest>

⁷ World Population Review, 2023. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/states>

⁸ Census Bureau, 2017 National Population Projections Tables: Alternative Scenarios, Projections for the United States: 2017 to 2060, 2017. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2017/demo/popproj/2017-alternative-summary-tables.html>

⁹ Carter, L., J. Jones, L. Berry, V. Burkett, J. Murley, J. Obeysekera, P. Schramm, and D. Wear. 2014: Ch. 17: Southeast and the Caribbean. Climate Change Impacts in the United States: The Third National Climate Assessment, J. Melillo, T. Richmond, and G. Yohe, Eds., U.S. Global Change Research Program, 396-417. [doi:10.7930/J0NP22CB](https://doi.org/10.7930/J0NP22CB).