



On the Water Front

March 2019 | **A Message from John Balliew, P.E., President/CEO**

What snowpack means to El Paso's water supply

El Paso has high hopes for the snowpack in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Every drop of water counts when your city is in the middle of a long-term river drought.

But a hearty snowpack doesn't necessarily solve our water supply challenges. Our community's river supply is dependent on how much water reaches Elephant Butte Reservoir, which is currently at 10 percent of its capacity. River drought in 2018 resulted in a low of 3 percent capacity at Elephant Butte. Preliminary indications signal a May delivery of river water – two months later than normal.



Elephant Butte Reservoir

Rio Grande Watershed

When El Paso Water tracks snowpack, we focus on the precipitation that falls within the Rio Grande Watershed Basin, which extends 355,500 square miles through three U.S. states – Colorado, New Mexico and Texas – and five Mexican states.

The 1939 Rio Grande Compact divides a significant portion of the Rio Grande's water among Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. The amount of water that states receive depends on how much water is in the river that year. Upstream reservoirs – such as Heron, El Vado, Abiquiu and Cochiti – capture and help manage Rio Grande water resources.

The West has received plenty of snowfall this winter, but to understand what this means for El Paso and Elephant Butte, it's important to focus more narrowly on the snowpack within our watershed. Snow falling in Denver, Colorado, or even in neighboring Ruidoso, New Mexico, won't benefit the Rio Grande. However, if snow falls in the mountains near the Wolf Creek ski area in Colorado, or the New Mexico mountains near Taos or parts of Santa Fe – the Rio Grande will gain from the snow melt.

Our Rio Grande water depends on several factors falling into place: snowpack, runoff and soil conditions, and how much water is in storage at Elephant Butte.

Melting snowpack may be affected by factors such as sublimation when warm winds in May blow, transforming snow into water vapor. Two issues that could affect runoff flowing down into Elephant Butte are flooding in northern New Mexico and seepage losses, whether to dry soils or irrigation canal systems along the Rio Grande Corridor.

El Paso depends on the Rio Grande for about half of its water supply. However, EPWater has experienced severely reduced river supplies in the recent past. We endured 2013 – a year we received 10,000 out of a possible 60,000 acre feet of normal river water supply.

In anticipation

After studying the situation for several months, staff acted to reprioritize Capital Improvement Plan projects as well as expedite certain work to ensure preparedness. As a result, the Public Service Board in July 2018 approved a Drought Resolution, which allows for accelerated procurement for drought-relief projects. Limited river water means groundwater is at a premium. EPWater maximizes groundwater production by rehabilitating old wells and drilling new ones. To protect freshwater portions of our aquifer, we have applied desalination technologies to certain Lower Valley wells called upon during drought. We have prepared for this by easing off groundwater production in years when we have a normal river water supply. This helps stabilize our aquifers and prevents over-pumping.

EPWater possesses a reliable portfolio of water resources that we can turn to when one resource is limited, including desalination and water reuse. For many years, water reuse has been an effective water management strategy, whether replenishing our Hueco aquifer with treated wastewater or using reclaimed water for irrigation of parks, golf courses and industry.

We can also count on the Kay Bailey Hutchison Desalination Plant, which has helped us meet our water needs in times of drought. The world's largest inland desalination plant can produce up to 27.5 million gallons of fresh water per day.

EPWater is prepared to take on drought and prove our resiliency. Even though El Paso faces a shortened river water supply this spring, EPWater wants to assure customers that we have reliable options. We have built an innovative portfolio of water resources for circumstances exactly like this one.

As always, we will rely on our customers to be prudent and responsible with their water choices because in El Paso conservation is a way of life. For almost three decades, EPWater has seen total water usage per person decline by 35 percent.



On the Water Front is a publication of El Paso Water.

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