



PO Box 270444
Louisville, CO 80027
303-861-6481 • 303-880-4598
rockymountainclimate.org

West Heating Up Faster Than Rest of the United States Report: Warming Greatest in Colorado River Basin, Threatening Water Supplies

Immediate Release, March 27, 2008

Contacts:

Stephen Saunders, RMCO:
303-880-4598

Craig Noble, NRDC communications:
415-875-6100 (office) or 415-601-8235 (mobile)

Theo Spencer, NRDC climate center:
212-727-4538

Denver – The American West has warmed 70 percent more than the planet as a whole, according to a new analysis in a report released today by the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization (RMCO) and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). The West's most pronounced temperature increase is in the Colorado River basin, which has warmed more than twice as much as the global average, with effects that put at risk a major water supply for over 30 million people from Denver to Los Angeles.

According to the report's new analysis of temperature data, the last five years, 2003 through 2007, in the 11 western states were 1.7 degrees warmer than the region's 20th century average. That is 70 percent more than the global increase of 1.0 degree, measured in the same way.

The West's warming has been greatest in the Colorado River basin, covering parts of seven states, where the last five years were 2.2 degrees warmer than the 20th century average. That is the greatest increase in temperatures in the United States outside of Alaska. Across the West, the increases in temperature are linked to less snowfall, smaller snowpacks, and earlier snowmelt, affecting the 70 percent of western water supplies that come from snowmelt. Particularly vulnerable is the Colorado River, which is the major source of water in the West's arid and semi-arid interior.

“Scientists have been saying that heat-trapping gases will make the West hotter and drier, and our analysis shows that the changes are already well underway,” said Stephen Saunders, president of RMCO and one of the report's principal authors.

“Global warming is hitting the West hard,” said Theo Spencer of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). “It is already taking an economic toll on the region's tourism, recreation, skiing, hunting and fishing activities. The speed of warming and mounting economic damage make clear the urgent need to limit global warming pollution.”

The report, “Hotter and Drier: The West's Changed Climate,” also includes similar temperature analyses for each of the western states, showing that the most recent five years in Arizona was

2.2 degrees warmer than the 20th century average; in California, 1.1 degrees warmer; Colorado, 1.9 degrees warmer; Idaho, 1.8 degrees warmer; Montana, 2.1 degrees warmer; Nevada, 1.7 degrees warmer; New Mexico, 1.3 degrees warmer; Oregon, 1.4 degrees warmer; Utah, 2.1 degrees warmer; Washington, 1.4 degrees warmer; and Wyoming, 2.0 degrees warmer. The differences in the warming are consistent with scientific projections that the interior West will warm more than coastal areas.

The report also includes a new analysis showing that the snowpacks that feed the Colorado River are melting quicker in recent springs.

Drawing on 50 scientific studies and 125 other government and scientific sources, the report broadly documents that climate change is having a greater effect on the West than on any other part of the United States outside Alaska, including these additional effects:

- The area being burned by western wildfires has increased 6.7 times in recent years, compared to earlier years.
- Populations of tree-killing bark beetles, historically have been held in check by low mountain temperatures, now are expanding their range in unprecedented ways. In Colorado and southern Wyoming, all mature lodgepole pine forests are predicted to be eliminated within three to five years.
- In an unpublicized report, U.S. Forest Service researchers recently linked the “sudden aspen decline” that is killing aspens in Colorado to the hotter and drier conditions of a changed climate.
- Glaciers are melting away across the West. In Glacier National Park, where the U.S. Geologic Survey predicted all glaciers would be gone by 2030, they now are likely to be eliminated by 2020.
- Wildlife is being affected by climate change. In Yosemite National Park, 14 of 50 studied mammal species can no longer be found in lower-elevation areas they inhabited in the last century.
- Hotter and drier conditions are hurting farmers and ranchers across the West. Nationally, four of the five worst years for crop losses from drought have occurred since 2000.
- In Montana, in eight out of the last 10 years, drought and higher temperatures have led to the shutdown of fishing in nationally acclaimed angling rivers.

The full report is available on the web site of the Rocky Mountain Climate Organization, www.rockymountainclimate.org.

RMCO is a three-year old, Colorado-based coalition of 17 local governments; Denver Water, the state’s largest water provider; 17 businesses; and 11 nonprofit organizations.

-end-