

As Population Surges, Harsh Climate Of Southwest Will Only Get Harsher



Monument Valley in Navajo Nation straddling the Utah/Arizona border.

CREDIT: FLICKR/DAVID SMITH

By Ari Phillips May 8, 2014

A new report from several hundred scientists underpins the impacts already being felt across the Southwest as a crippling drought grips California and states across the region struggle to allocate water to meet the demand of communities, industries and ecosystems.

“Just think of this year’s California drought — the type of hot, snowless, severe drought that we expect more of in the future,” Gregg Garfin, a lead author of the Southwest portion of the National Climate Assessment and assistant professor of climate, natural resources, and policy at the University of Arizona, told ThinkProgress in an email.

A harsh climate is nothing new for the Southwest, even before it was exacerbated by climate change. One hundred and fifty years ago, intrepid explorers like John Wesley Powell and fearless scouts like Kit Carson struggled to traverse the hot, dry, relentless terrain to get from the flat Midwestern plains to the bountiful Pacific coast.

Some seven generations later, the Southwest is as hot and dry as ever, but the traditional challenges are compounded by an abundance of urban dwellers flocking to the region for the year-round sun and outdoorsy lifestyle. The Congressionally-mandated assessment from over 300 climate scientists and experts shows how climate change could undercut this quintessentially American settling of the West — a trend that’s reached a boiling point after several hundred years of steady buildup.



The Powell survey on its second trip down the Colorado River, 1871.

CREDIT: USGS

The Southwest portion of the National Climate Assessment reads like a warning for future travelers to the region:

The Southwest is the hottest and driest region in the United States, where the availability of water has defined its landscapes, history of human settlement, and modern economy. Climate changes pose challenges for an already parched region that is expected to get hotter and, in its southern half, significantly drier.

The introduction actually notes that tourism and recreation will be significantly “affected by reduced streamflow and a shorter snow season, influencing everything from the ski industry to lake and river recreation.” All the while, the population of the area is expected to increase from 56 million people to 94 million people by mid-century, an increase of more than two-thirds.

“What they’re saying is what we’ve been seeing for several years now,” Jeremy Nichols, director of the Climate and Energy Program at WildEarth Guardians, told ThinkProgress.

“Unprecedented weather, forests under stress, the writing on the wall just keep getting clearer.”