Drought in the Colorado River Basin: Environmental Impacts

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Water Education Foundation – Colorado River Symposium
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Photo: John Locher/AP
Water development caused “drought” for freshwater-dependent habitats
Colorado River in Yuma c. 1900 and 2012:
Decreased water levels and spring floods result in loss of native riverside forests

Photo: Jonathan Waterman
Salton Sea:
Declining inflows post QSA-transfer creating exposed playa, air quality impacts, habitat loss

Photo: Mike Fernandez/Audubon
Colorado River Delta:
Elimination of flows resulted in near-complete loss of 1.5 million acre ecosystem

Photo: Jennifer Pitt/Audubon
Birds need water

Yellow-billed cuckoo

Yuma Ridgway’s Rail

Sandhill crane

Yellow warbler

Photos clockwise from top left: Mary Miguez / Audubon Photography Awards
Tara Tanaka/Audubon Photography Awards
Jesse Gordon/Audubon Photography Awards
Claudio Contreras Koob
2021 drought conditions “on the ground”
BEETLES: 20 years of impact on forests

Photos: Denver Post
FIRE: Climate change causing increase in annual fire weather days

- Heat
- Low humidity
- Wind

Change in annual fire weather days 1973-2020 (total # days)

Source: NOAA/NCEI's Local Climatological Data, Climate Central analysis
2020 Grizzly Creek Fire 32,631 acres on Colorado River above Glenwood Springs

Photo: Glenwood Springs Post-Independent
2021 mudslides: highway closed in Glenwood Canyon, river choked with sediment

Photo: Hugh Carey/The Colorado Sun
2021 Water Temperature: fishing closures

Photo: Matt Stensland/Special to The Colorado Sun
2021 Dolores River below McPhee Reservoir

Photo: Cody Perry/Rig to Flip