

# Big Ag Is Draining Wyoming Dry

The American West is facing a water crisis, compounded by climate change, a history of bad policy, and a refusal to stand up to Big Agribusiness. Despite a wet winter in early 2023 providing a short-term respite, a long-term megadrought persists across the region, as groundwater storage is being depleted after decades of over-withdrawals.<sup>1</sup> Corporate farms remain unphased by this fact, continuing to drain Wyoming's water supplies to prop up factory farms that, in turn, worsen the climate crisis and associated drought. The West is ground zero for Big Ag's assault on our water and climate future, and states must halt the expansion of these mega-farms and reallocate water for truly beneficial uses.

## Bad Policy Threatens Colorado River Supplies

The Colorado River is one of the most regulated rivers in the world, due in no small part to its famous interstate water agreement: the Colorado River Compact.<sup>2</sup> Established in 1922, the Compact theoretically distributes 16 million acre-feet of water annually to seven states and Mexico. The Upper Basin states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming are obligated to deliver 7.5 million acre-feet to the Lower Basin states of Arizona, California, and Nevada, and the Upper Basin can only take its shares from what remains.<sup>3</sup> Wyoming receives 7 percent of the Colorado River's allocations, equivalent to around 1 million acre-feet.<sup>4</sup>

The Colorado River Compact formed during a period of abnormally wet rainfall, resulting in an agreement that allocated 15 million acre-feet annually between the states. Yet in recent decades, only 12 to 13 million acre-feet have flowed through the river each year, further exacerbated by a treaty guaranteeing Mexico 1.5 million acre-feet.<sup>5</sup> The Compact relies on fixed numbers, leaving little room for declining supplies and potentially leaving Upper Basin states unable to fulfil their obligations to the Lower Basin.<sup>6</sup> Reservoirs along the Colorado River have reached record lows in the past few years, forcing the Bureau of Reclamation to begin curbing supplies to Lower Basin states.<sup>7</sup>

Following months of dispute, Lower Basin states came to a tentative agreement in May 2023, promising voluntary reductions of 3 million acre-feet by 2026.<sup>8</sup> While sparing Wyoming for now, solutions to this crisis will require all states' participation. The Lower Basin's proposal is insufficient for long-term security, cutting nowhere near enough water to restore water levels along the river.<sup>9</sup>

## Growing Water Scarcity in Wyoming

Wyoming's wide range of elevations face unique threats from climate change. For instance, the state's mountains contain 1,500 glaciers, all under serious threat from warming temperatures. This,

coupled with increased drought, will make water availability increasingly scarce throughout Wyoming.<sup>10</sup> The state's Green River, which drains into the Colorado River, is also anticipated to shrink over time.<sup>11</sup>

The Colorado River provides water for 5.5 million acres of irrigated land in Wyoming, but it is also a major supplier to cities like Cheyenne, where the Basin provides 70 percent of the water supply.<sup>12</sup> Agricultural use far outstrips household use with more than 80 percent of the state's Colorado River supply compared to domestic use of just 3 percent. In terms of water rights, however, cities like Cheyenne are first in line for cuts, potentially shutting off most of the city's water if cuts go deep enough. Irrigation rights are often preserved by the shrine of seniority status, an extremely dangerous precedent for domestic use in Wyoming.<sup>13</sup>

## **Alfalfa Production Abuses Wyoming's Dwindling Water Supplies**

Because of Wyoming's gravelly soil, the state is unsuited for much agricultural production beyond livestock grazing and alfalfa.<sup>14</sup> However, alfalfa is a notoriously thirsty crop. Food & Water Watch estimates that Wyoming's 2022 alfalfa production required 258 billion gallons of consumptive use — which equals 76 percent of the state's Colorado River allocation and is enough to supply Wyoming's entire population with their indoor water needs for 29 years.<sup>15</sup> Consumptive use defines water that is lost through evaporation or transpiration and unavailable for future reuse, as opposed to withdrawals that may flow back into the ecosystem through runoff from irrigation.<sup>16</sup> Most of the state's water comes from surface water, including the Green River and other Colorado River tributaries.<sup>17</sup>

Wyoming's average irrigation water applied per acre is the lowest among all Colorado River states, on par with the national average.<sup>18</sup> Even so, hay requires more water than any other major crop in Wyoming,<sup>19</sup> leaving it an open question as to why so much of it is grown in such an arid state.

## **Livestock Production Adds Further Stress in Drought-Prone Wyoming**

Beef cattle ranching is especially prominent in the state, with nearly 300,000 cattle housed on large operations (those with 500 or more cattle). Food & Water Watch estimates that these cattle require 4.4 million gallons a day, or 1.6 billion gallons a year.<sup>20</sup> Across the basin, both dairy cows and beef cattle are dependent upon alfalfa crops for feed, making the two industries deeply interdependent.<sup>21</sup> Beef production in particular sucks up a significant portion of water across the West, using up two-thirds of the cattle feed irrigated from Western rivers.<sup>22</sup>

Ranchers across Wyoming are at the mercy of a highly concentrated beef industry, in which four companies slaughter 85 percent of U.S. beef cattle.<sup>23</sup> The real cost of beef rose after the meatpacking industry became more tightly consolidated, while the ranchers' share of the profits declined.<sup>24</sup> Even as grocery prices skyrocketed in the past few years, average producers are not seeing that money — instead, it lines the pockets of companies like Tyson and Cargill.<sup>25</sup> Diminishing profits put farmers and ranchers in a difficult situation, one that hits smaller, family-scale farms the hardest. On top of this, worsening drought conditions raise the cost of feed and other necessities. Many farmers face the pressure to “get big or get out” — expand their herds to factory farm sizes or sell out of the business altogether,<sup>26</sup> only further consolidating the industry.

## Conclusion

Big Ag's water abuses are endangering communities and ecosystems across Wyoming, creating scarcity and crisis in its wake. The state must radically transform how it thinks about industrial agriculture's water use and rapidly scale back alfalfa production. One way to achieve this goal is to strip alfalfa of its protected beneficial use status, thereby removing much of its water allocations.<sup>27</sup> Wyoming is beyond easy solutions and must be willing to take bold action to secure a safe and livable future.

## Endnotes

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