

Climate change shrinking West's water supply

By Emily Benson, High Country News

Picture a snowflake drifting down from a frigid February sky in western Colorado and settling high in the Rocky Mountains. By mid-April, the alpine snowpack is likely at its peak. Warming temperatures in May or June will then melt the snow, sending droplets rushing down a mountain stream or seeping into the soil to replenish an aquifer.

The West's water supply depends on each of these interconnected sources: the frozen reservoir of snow atop mountain peaks, mighty rivers like the Colorado and groundwater reserves deep below the earth's surface. But the snowpack is becoming less reliable, one of the region's most important rivers is diminishing and in many places the groundwater level has dropped.

Three recent studies illuminate the magnitude of these declines, the role climate change has played and the outlook for the future.

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