

Climate change increases need to store water

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Anyone who has lived in the upper Midwest for a spell knows a little secret about the cold: The colder it is, the less likely a big blizzard will dump a back-breaking amount of snow.

The reason is plain atmospheric physics: The higher the temperature, the more moisture the air can hold. If the temperature is 10 below zero, there is much less capacity for a large snowfall than if the temperature is in the 20s or 30s.

With that piece of information, the seeming contradiction of the recent East Coast blizzard comes into focus in the discussions about climate change. Warmer air allowed more moisture to be carried -- and then dumped -- in the form of feet of snow in the New England area.

Climate scientists say this is the new normal: Less snow and fewer snowstorms, but they occasionally will carry a wallop that will remind old-timers of the Blizzard of '47, the Christmas storm of 1982 and the 3-foot monster that struck in March 2003. Other times, the warmer air will mean the precipitation will fall as rain, even in the winter.

Coloradans should be concerned over that final development, because it will likely have to make us rethink our positions on water storage. In cooler times, plentiful snow would sit in the higher elevations as a water bank, slowly trickling its liquid gold to the thirsty Front Range throughout the summer. However, under new models, what snow there is will melt more quickly. If that water is not conserved, it will flow out of the state and leave the burgeoning communities of the Front Range high and dry.

Residents of the state must practice storing water for future times. Unfortunately, trends in climate science seem to point to the need for those skills to be put to greater use.