

# Water issues again loom large in Colorado

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When local forecasters predicted that a foot of snow was headed to the Front Range over the weekend, it was understandable to think local water managers were dancing a jig. After all, the region has seen drought conditions for more than a year, leading to forest fires, increased demands on local reservoirs and watering restrictions for city dwellers.

As Saturday and Sunday unfolded, however, the optimism of water managers also dried up. Only a few inches of snow appeared, and the precipitation locked inside was measured by tenths of an inch, not the inch or two needed just to get to a normal level of snowpack.

That's the difficulty in trying to convey the long-term water catastrophe that has befallen Colorado. Levels are so low, only six reservoirs in the South Platte basin are holding more water than their average for this time of year. And some of the most prominent are well below average. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Union Reservoir is at 43 percent capacity, when in normal years at this time it is at 85 percent. Lake Loveland is at 31 percent, compared to its average for March of 85 percent.

This week, Fort Collins said it will enact watering restrictions on April 1, and many municipalities on the Front Range will likely follow suit.

Colorado's climate is semi-arid. When Zebulon Pike and Stephen Long described eastern Colorado as the Great American Desert, they recognized that water would always be at a premium. Through the efforts of the first settlers to build reservoirs and irrigation courseways, agriculture has flourished and cities have risen. However, for future growth to occur, today's leaders must prepare for those times, like 2012 and 2013, when the water won't be plentiful.

It will take more than a snowstorm or two to turn that around.