

https://www.pinalcentral.com/casa_grande_dispatch/area_news/san-carlos-lakes-dry-up-is-earliest-ever-as-water-levels-plummet/article_d24af3bd-c102-5c39-8344-7160343c4ee2.html?fbclid=IwAR01m1CFRUTuJrJfQok7JwqXLt023B13bBcfrRbdJu2eCnZ9nEHrUJTNBqo

featured top story

San Carlos Lake's dry-up is earliest ever as water levels plummet

- By AARON DORMAN Staff Writer
- Apr 20, 2021 Updated Apr 20, 2021
-
- Comments

COOLIDGE — While the San Carlos Irrigation and Drainage District has been telling farmers for months now to plan for drought conditions, recent water shortages in San Carlos Lake have nevertheless reached unprecedented low levels.

On April 13, the lake was down to 55 acre-feet — the lake's regular capacity of 19,500 acre-feet, once seen as an average, could become rare as the Gila River is fed less and less by melting snows from the Black Range in New Mexico.

According to Shane Lindstrom, general manager for SCIDD, while the water levels have been low before, but this is the earliest in the year the lake has ever gone effectively dry.

Coupled with limitations on Colorado River water soon to go into effect, local farmers face a present and future with increasing water scarcity. While other districts are somewhat better off with groundwater and Colorado River water, San Carlos' supply from the Gila is notoriously unstable.

"It's going to be a very stressful time," Lindstrom said. "I wouldn't want to be a grower right now."

Water availability will also play a role in determining the viability of major projects such as the proposed Resolution Copper mine near Superior.

During a hearing last week on legislation that would cancel the land swap necessary to facilitate the mine, environmental geologist James Wells warned that the project would use 250 billion gallons of water, enough to support a city roughly the size of Tempe for 50 years.

The copper mine would draw partly from the East Salt River Valley but could also draw down groundwater levels at a time when there is already a shortfall.

"Tens of thousands of people rely on groundwater for their water supplies," Wells said. "There's not enough to go around in this part of Arizona."

U.S. Rep. Tom O'Halleran, who represents Arizona's 1st Congressional District, acknowledged that Arizona is going through the worst drought conditions ever recorded. O'Halleran said that his office is in constant contact with agricultural stakeholders on the cost of getting water, either through more groundwater pumping or elsewhere.

“The farmer and ag community is very important to the state,” O’Halloran said. “We need to find ways to allow them to afford the type of drip irrigation to conserve water necessary to grow crops.”

More radical plans for importing water include building a pipeline between the Mississippi and Colorado river systems, or desalinating water in the Sea of Cortez and treating it in Yuma. The latter would require new infrastructure and international treaties with Mexico.

But as legislators and regulators discuss future options and remedies, many local farmers are struggling.

Nancy Caywood, who owns and operates Caywood Farms near Eleven Mile Corner, said that her farm is solely dependent on SCIDD water and she is worried about losing her alfalfa crop. The family has had to plant corn using well water in a different area around Coolidge, with the hope of offsetting losses at the main farm.

“We are in a megadrought, which will not change in the foreseeable future,” Caywood said. “They better start taking suggestions seriously or we will dry up. It’s not just agriculture’s problems, it’s everybody’s. People think they can just go to the grocery store and get vegetables. But we can’t be dependent on imports. Agriculture is freedom.”

According to Caywood, many farmers have leased their land out to solar companies or other projects because of the lack of water, or have liquidated some of the land entirely.

One major frustration is due to the way water is allocated. Area farmers have to pay for water access, even if the water itself doesn’t come.

SCIDD services 50,000 acres and roughly 200 growers; Lindstrom acknowledged the need to be “as diplomatic as possible” and “even let people vent.”

As everyone waits for rain, SCIDD is working to repair infrastructure so that when the water does come, there will be less loss from ground infiltration.

That process includes lining canals with concrete and repairing or replacing wells that are more than 50 years old. Lindstrom said SCIDD is still working on securing funding and applying for grants. SCIDD’s “main stem” canal runs for roughly 80 miles, with another 200 miles of lateral canals.

In addition, Lindstrom says Pinal County irrigation districts’ representatives meet frequently for planning purposes and that they have spoken with both farmers and the district’s zanjeros, or irrigators, knowing that the situation can be emotional.

“We want people to know that we’re all in this together,” Lindstrom said. “There will always be agriculture, it’s just a matter of how much.”



Aaron Dorman

Aaron Dorman is a reporter covering Coolidge and the surrounding area. He can be reached at adorman@pinalcentral.com.

- Author email