

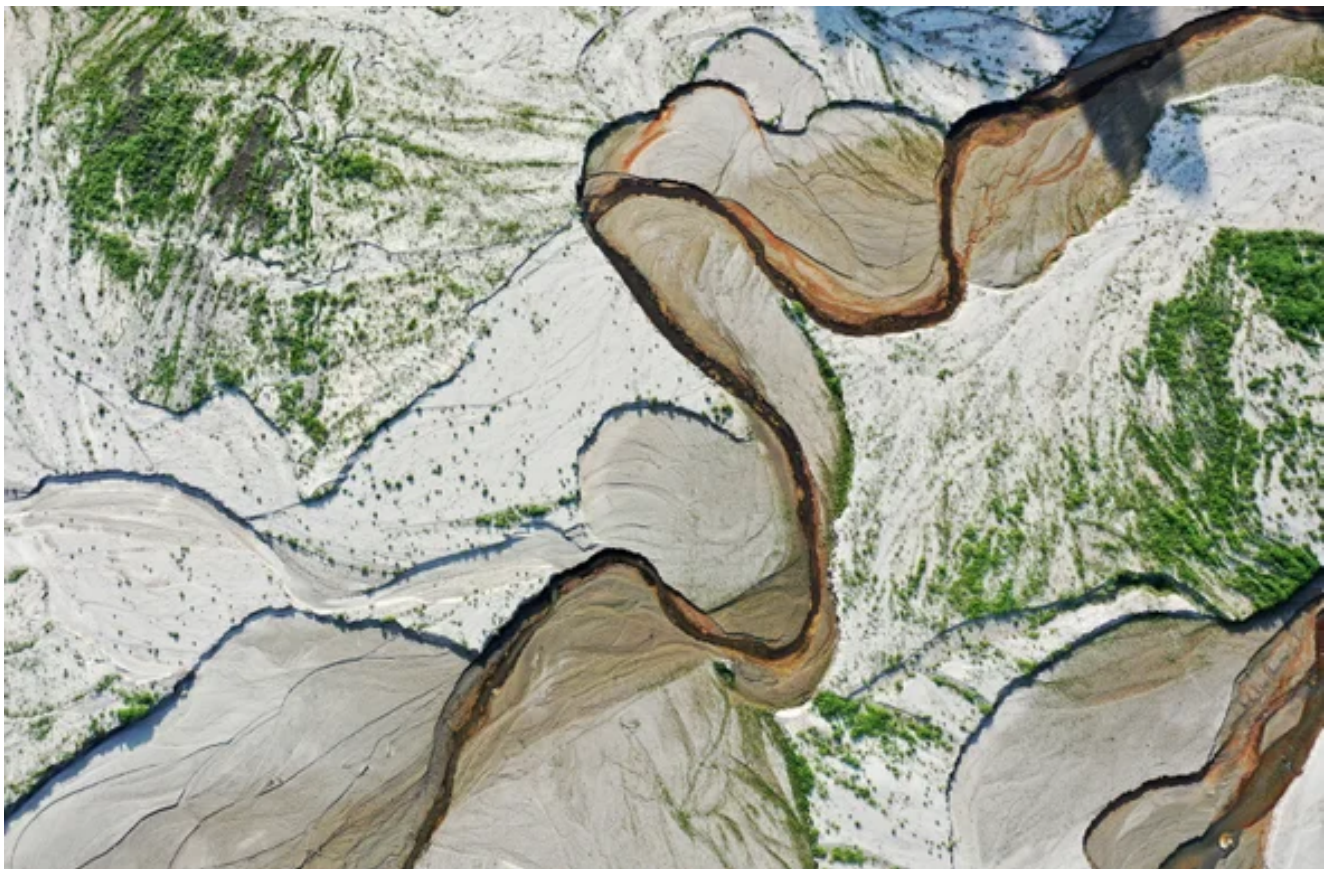
E&E NEWS

CLIMATE CHANGE

Drought Spreads to 93 Percent of West—That’s Never Happened

The extreme dry conditions threaten crops and raise wildfire risks

By Thomas Frank, E&E News on July 7, 2021



In an aerial view, the San Gabriel River and the exposed lakebed of the San Gabriel Reservoir are seen on June 29, 2021 in the San Gabriel Mountains near Azusa, California. Credit: Mario Tama *Getty Images*

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The western United States is experiencing its worst drought this century, threatening to kill crops, spark wildfires and harm public health as hot and dry conditions are expected to continue this month.

More than 93% of the land in seven Western states is in drought conditions, and nearly 59% of the area is experiencing extreme or exceptional drought—the two worst conditions—according to the latest figures released by the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Both figures are the highest this century for the area that covers all of Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and most of Utah.

Before this year, the record for the amount of Western land in extreme or exceptional drought was 43%, set in September 2003.

The conditions have led to fire and fishing restrictions across the West and have prompted wildfire alerts. The National Interagency Fire Center is warning that the intensifying drought across the West is creating significant wildfire risk over the next three months from California to the Northwest and across the northern Plains.

“Last year, we had a lot of wildfire and a lot of smoke. It would be very surprising if that did not happen again this year,” Douglas Kluck, NOAA’s director of regional climate services in Kansas City, said in a virtual presentation last week.

Agriculture Department reports show that several crops, including wheat, sunflowers and barley, are threatened by the extensive drought, which is concentrated in the West but is also affecting areas as far east as the Dakotas, Minnesota and Iowa.

“We have huge concerns up in the northern Plains. Conditions are not good,” Dennis Today, director of USDA’s Midwest Climate Hub, said during the presentation.

The Drought Monitor said drought-stricken ranchers are selling their cattle because of a lack of feed and poor forage conditions.

At least eight national forests in the West have imposed fire restrictions. Fishing restrictions

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“This has been a very slow-developing drought ... that we’ve been talking about since last year,” Kluck said. “Some can date it back to last spring. The super-hot temperatures aren’t helping much.”

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Thomas Frank covers the federal response to climate change for *E&E News*.

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