

"Drought Watch on the Rio Grande" – August 30, 2012 Press Release & Graphs

Rio Grande Reservoirs 94% Empty – Labor Day Water Level 110 feet Below Dam Spillway

The prolonged extreme drought conditions across the U.S. and in the southwest and Rio Grande basin have resulted in continuing very low river flows and reservoir water levels. Derrick O'Hara at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation El Paso Office estimates that over the Labor Day weekend Elephant Butte reservoir will be almost 94% empty with just 110,000 acre-feet of water in storage. With this little amount of storage water levels will be 109.6 feet below the dam spillway. By comparison, last year on Labor Day the reservoir held 195,000 acre-feet and was 96 feet below the spillway, a water level almost 14 feet higher than this year.

Currently more than half of the lower United States is in severe drought conditions including almost all of the upper Rio Grande basin (New Mexico, West Texas and Colorado). Most of the inflow to the Rio Grande Project reservoirs is from spring-time runoff from mountain snowpack in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Due to La Nina conditions this past winter the snowpack was well below average and evaporation from the warm, windy spring resulted in a very low inflow to Elephant Butte reservoir of just 21% of the 30-year March-July average. This was the 5th lowest inflow since 1979 and did little to replenish the reservoirs.

Conditions have not improved over the summer. Dave Novlan, El Paso Office Climatologist, NOAA-National Weather Service reports that the region has experienced a disappointing Monsoon season. Precipitation has been spotty and to-date is about 71% of normal and temperatures have been above average. So far this summer El Paso has had 28 days of 100 degrees or more, almost double the average of around 15 days. These conditions are not expected to improve soon. The Climate Prediction Center three-month forecast for the Rio Grande basin calls for above average temperatures, average chances of precipitation and for drought conditions to persist or intensify.

The drought conditions have had the greatest impact on agriculture across the nation. In this region the surface water allocation from the Rio Grande Project was 38.7% of a full supply. However, the amount of water available to each of the three irrigation districts varies widely due to different amounts of conserved water carried over from last year, pumping of groundwater and use of treated reclaimed water. Because of the lack of river water farmers were not able to plant large portions of their land. Locally, urban users have not been impacted as much by the Rio Grande surface water supply shortage because of developed groundwater supplies, use of the El Paso Water Utilities desalination plant and conservation by consumers. El Paso Water Utilities has a water conservation campaign with education programs, saving tips, free low-flow showerheads and more (<http://LessIsMoreEP.org>).

Releases to the river from the reservoirs will stop around September 12. The combined water storage in both Elephant Butte and Caballo reservoirs when the gates close will be 109,800 acre-feet or just 5% of the 2.23 million acre-foot capacity. All of the remaining water in storage will be Rio Grande Compact Credit water or San Juan-Chama water which is owned by upstream users and is not available for use in southern New Mexico or Texas. With an almost empty reservoir the river water supply situation for next year depends on this winter's snowpack.

Drought Watch on the Rio Grande is provided by the Texas AgriLife Research Center at El Paso and Texas Water Resources Institute, The Texas A&M University System, with support from the USDA-NIFA Rio Grande Basin Initiative, in collaboration with the United States Bureau of Reclamation El Paso Field Office. E-mail or call to receive future issues of Drought Watch.

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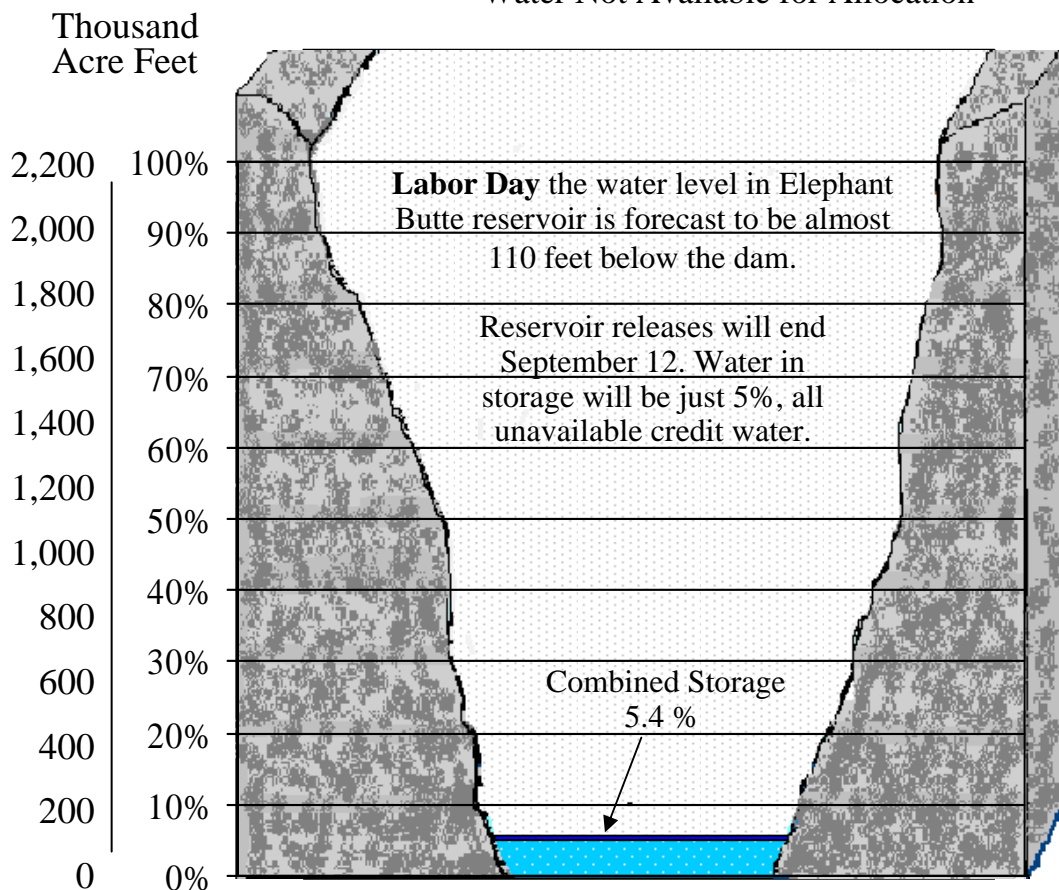


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Surface Water Supply Conditions August 30, 2012

Combined Elephant Butte and Caballo Reservoir Storage

Water Available for Allocation
 Water Not Available for Allocation



Water Supply Conditions & Forecasts

- **Water in Storage** is 121,000 acre-feet or **5.4%** of the combined reservoir capacity of 2.23 million acre-feet. Of this, 109,800 acre-feet or 91% of the amount in storage is Rio Grande Compact and San Juan-Chama credit water which is not available for use. Severe drought conditions are projected to persist or intensify across the region.
- **Inflow to Elephant Butte Reservoir** was only **21%** of the 30-year March-July average. In the last 15 years only three have had above average runoff; 1997, 2005 and 2008. The Climate Prediction Center three month forecast calls for above normal temperatures and average chances of precipitation.
- **2012 Rio Grande Project average water allocation is 38.7% of a full supply.** Individual District's water availability varies widely.

Water allocation to agricultural and urban users as a percent of full supply (amount varies by district)

