

## *Mirasol, Looking at the Sun & Undammed: What's Next*

### **How is water allocated in Colorado?**

Colorado operates under prior appropriation, where water rights are allocated based on seniority. In times of scarcity, those with senior rights have a legal entitlement to the water before those with newer rights. This system is coupled with a, "use it or lose it" principle, where water rights holders must demonstrate their need for water. If they fail to use their full allocation, they risk losing it in subsequent years, which may discourage conservation efforts.

The Colorado River supplies drinking water to 40 million people and is shared between Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Arizona, California, Nevada, and Mexico. It also fuels hydropower resources in eight states and remains a crucial resource for [30 tribal nations](#) and agricultural communities across the West. The vast majority of crops grown in the arid climate of Western Colorado rely heavily on irrigation water from the Colorado River. In fact, agriculture uses between 70-80% of the Colorado River's water supply.

The allocation of water is governed by a complicated set of rules created over a century ago that determine who gets water and how much, but they allocated more than the river can sustain. This, in addition to the effect of climate change, has led to the river drying up, further intensifying concerns about water scarcity and threatening many communities livelihoods.

### **Eagle County Watershed**

[The Eagle River](#) drains west of the Continental Divide in central Colorado before flowing into the Colorado River. The Eagle River watershed is located primarily within Eagle County and includes the towns of Vail, Minturn, Avon, Edwards, Eagle, and Gypsum. The elevation, combined with the presence of mountain ranges, results in climactic variations that add an element of complexity to water use. [Increased drought](#) has resulted in lower snowpack that produces lower streamflow. This can lead to an inadequate water supply needed to meet the demand of the growing population. Because of this, it is detrimental that we support policy and equity based solutions that provide

sustainable management of our water supply in anticipation of changes in local hydrology and water demand.

## Tribal Involvement

The rules for sharing the Colorado River water supply [expire in 2026](#), and state leaders are under pressure to agree on new guidelines. The [exclusion of tribes](#) in decision making has been an undercurrent in the Colorado River water negotiations for over a century. [Historically](#), tribes had to give up a lot of rights when they were forced into treaties with the federal government, but they did not give up their right to water needed to sustain their communities. Despite the government making promises to uphold this right, they built dams, ditches, reservoirs, canals, and other waterways to divert the river's waters for irrigation to other lands. In doing so, they interrupted the flow of the river into tribal land and degraded the quality and quantity of water available. These dramatic human-caused changes of trying to control water have ecological and social consequences.

Dams have [displaced](#) an overwhelming amount of people with a disproportionately high number being members of Indigenous communities. They have affected treaty-guaranteed fishing sites, resulting in large fish kills, decimating once abundant salmon populations. [Salmon](#) are sacred species that are central to Indigenous culture, diet, and ceremonies in the Northwestern United States. Salmon habitat must be protected to ensure future generations can carry on the fishing way of life they have for centuries.

The Ute Tribes are the Indigenous peoples whose land we currently reside on. Despite having [senior water](#) rights dating back to 1868, the tribe received none of its rightful water for decades as non-Native settlers dammed rivers and diverted flows. When they have been able to secure water rights, they have lacked expensive infrastructure to take advantage of it. Despite being historically left out of the conversation, tribes are beginning to change that.

Of the 30 Colorado River Basin tribes, 22 already have federally recognized rights to about a quarter of the river's water. Tribes are a key stakeholder, and are making their voices heard in upcoming negotiations on the use of the Colorado River. They are urging federal water managers to fulfill the

responsibility to do right by tribes by rejecting any new water rules that would encroach on the government's obligation to make sure tribes have access to water, and to adequately compensate any tribes that are forced to take water cuts in times of shortage. Tribes are also [requesting](#) the federal government maximize their ability to participate in conservation programs in addition to ensuring they have a formalized way to participate in negotiations. The goal of these negotiations are to have a stable system and ensure tribes can stay on their ancestral lands.

## What You Can Do

There are actions you can take to support sustainable land and water use right here in our local community!

- **Get Involved with Eagle River Coalition**
  - The [Eagle River Coalition](#) advocates for the health of the Upper Colorado and Eagle River watersheds through research, education and projects. Become a [volunteer](#) and help with highway cleanups, native plantings, invasive species removal and more!
  - Check out the [Eagle River Water Plan](#) that was developed to provide proactive water management recommendations that anticipate changes to local hydrology and water demand.
- **Buy Food Local**
  - Purchase from local farms and ranches when possible to support local and Sustainable food
  - [Local Foodshed Production Map](#)
- **Reduce Red Meat Consumption**
  - It is not necessary to cut red meat out of your diet, but reducing red meat consumption can lower greenhouse gas emissions, save water, and have a beneficial impact on your health.
- **Water Wisely**
  - Reducing outdoor irrigation is one of the most effective ways to conserve water. Get an irrigation assessment and explore water conservation resources from the [Beyond Lawn Program](#).
  - Utilize Eagle County Conservation District's [Watering Guide](#) to irrigate efficiently and conserve water. This will help reduce your

water bill and conserve limited resources while addressing drought concerns.

- **Recognize the Ute Tribes**
  - The Ute Tribes are the Indigenous peoples whose lands we currently reside on. Visit [this website](#) to learn more about the Ute Tribes, or visit the [Ute Indian Museum](#) in Montrose to learn more from members of the Ute community.
  - Remember that recognition of settler colonialism is merely the first step one can take to be an ally to Indigenous peoples. Visit [this resource](#) for ideas on going beyond land acknowledgements.
- **Restoring the Colorado River**
  - Check out this [article](#) on the stress the Colorado River has endured and efforts of people trying to restore it.

To learn more about the films, visit [Mirasol](#) and [Undammed - Patagonia](#).