



A Significant Moment in the Colorado River Water Supply Crisis

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On Sunday, July 12, the surface of Lake Powell was 3524.32 feet above sea level, and the surface of Lake Mead was at 1042.77 ft.⁷ These elevations equated to 5,505,869 and 7,169,640 acre feet (af), respectively, of live storage in the two reservoirs. The combined total live storage of these reservoirs was 12,675,509 af. The last time the combined total live storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead was this small was May 23, 1957, during construction of Glen Canyon Dam when the entire amount of 12,668,000 af was stored in Lake Mead (Fig. 1). It was not until March 1963 that the river diversion tunnels at Glen Canyon Dam were closed, and Lake Powell began to fill.

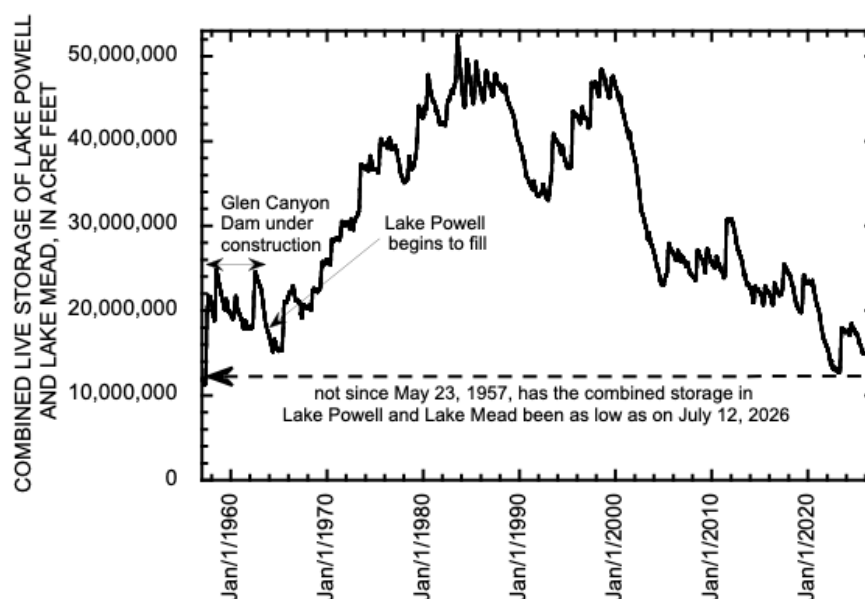


Figure 1. Graph showing total combined live storage of Lake Powell and Lake Mead since January 1, 1957. Lake Powell began to fill in March 1963.

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⁷ Reported by Reclamation on July 13, 2026, at https://www.usbr.gov/uc/water/hydrodata/reservoir_data/site_map.html.

The unprecedented low in combined storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead on July 12 broke the previous record low of 12,677,161 af that was set on March 14, 2023. Since March 2026, the combined storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead has been depleted approximately 16,000 af/day, except during May when the depletion rate was 11,000 af/day and snowmelt runoff from the Rocky Mountains and supplemental releases from Flaming Gorge Reservoir were flowing into Lake Powell (Table 1). During winter, water use in the Lower Basin and releases from Lake Mead were much less, and the depletion of combined storage was only approximately 6,500 af/day in February and 2,600 af/day in January.

	Depletion rate of combined contents of Lake Powell and Lake Mead,
	in acre feet per day
January	2,626
February	6,494
March	15,733
April	16,861
May	11,001
June	16,230
July 1-13	16,661

Table 1. Monthly average daily depletion rate of combined reservoir storage in Lake Powell and Lake Mead in 2026.

Although Lake Powell is administratively in the Upper Division of the Colorado River Basin and Lake Mead is administratively in the Lower Basin, the combined storage in the two reservoirs is downstream from all significant consumptive uses by the Upper Division states and upstream from all significant uses in the Lower Division.⁸ Lake Powell and Lake Mead essentially comprise one gigantic reservoir, separated into two parts by the Grand Canyon where there are minimal consumptive uses.

These two reservoirs are the largest in the United States and hold slightly less than 60% of total amount of water presently stored in the Basin. Every day going forward, until runoff from the 2026-2027 winter snowpack begins next spring, a new record low will likely be set. This is a significant moment in the evolving Colorado River water supply crisis.

⁸ Except for Southern Nevada Water Authority's relatively small, direct withdrawal of water from Lake Mead.