



TUWaterWays

Water News and More from the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law & Policy
Authors: Christopher Dalbom, Mark Davis, Haley Gentry, Katie Moreland, & Matthew Allen
January 23, 2026

The World's Empty Water Wallet

The [United Nations University](#) Institute for Water, Environment, and Health released a report detailing just how depleted global water resources truly are and how, globally, our water “budget” is running low. [The report](#), *Global Water Bankruptcy: Living Beyond Our Hydrological Means in the Post-Crisis Era*, uses financial terminology to explain how current water governance and management [have led to “overspending”](#) annual renewable water “income”, and depletion of long-term “savings” in aquifers, glaciers, wetlands, and other natural reservoirs. According to the report, these have been damaged beyond realistic prospects of full recovery.

The terminology of bankruptcy, rather than “crisis” or “stress,” was used to convey that the depleting water resources are not temporary or situational, but long-term, widespread issues with permanent ramifications. Though a global concern, the report indicates that [not everywhere is water bankrupt](#) and that unequal burdens are placed on specific areas, such as the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and the American Southwest. Moreover, certain groups like small-scale farmers, indigenous people, low-income urban residents, women, and youth bear the brunt of the burden while the benefits of overuse often accrue to more powerful actors. Though impacts are seen in different ways, this report is timely and needed because [roughly 75% of the world's population](#) lives in areas that are “water-insecure” or “critically water-insecure,” with around 3 billion of those people living in areas where the total water storage is declining or unstable.

The impacts on land are just as stark, as water depletion erodes soil and contributes to the loss of wetlands. For example, [since 1970, 35% of the world's wetlands have been lost](#), which serve as natural buffers against the impacts of natural disasters that are significantly more harmful due to the effects of climate change. The report notes that these losses are “symptoms of systems that have overspent their hydrological budget and eroded the natural capital that once made recovery possible, with knock-on effects for food prices, employment, migration, and geopolitical stability.” The report calls for broad governance and systemic changes, including preventing further irreversible damage, rebalancing water rights to match current water levels, and transforming water-intensive sectors such as agriculture and industry. All of which are no easy feats, but as the world falls further into water [bankruptcy](#), we will one day have to restructure, or else humanity may find itself facing liquidation (minus the liquid, supposedly).

Still Dry in the American West

While half the country prepares for a winter storm of epic proportions (and New Orleanians mentally prepare for morning low temps below freezing), the [severe winter drought continues to impact many states](#) from the Pacific Northwest to the South. Western states like Colorado and Utah are still experiencing record-low snowfall amidst more winter rain and warmer conditions. Most regions in [Utah are experiencing moderate, severe, or extreme drought](#). In Colorado, December 2025 was the [warmest December on record](#), with many locations breaking numerous daily record

high-temperature records. Skiers have been dismayed with the [number of trails closed at many of the nation's most popular ski resorts](#). Surprisingly, California is one of the few West Coast states [free of drought this winter](#). With record [rainfall \(and flooding\)](#), the state's major reservoirs are at [127% of their average level](#) and have provided more snowpack, with a statewide snow-water equivalent (a measure of the amount of water in the snowpack) of 6.5 inches, which is still only 71% of the average for this time of year.

However, due to the drought across much of the Mountain West, California farmers [are still concerned about water allocations](#) for crop irrigation. The drought is putting more strain on Colorado River [negotiations as lawmakers](#) have been summoned to DC to continue working out an agreement. The 2007 operational guidelines for Lake Powell and Lake Mead are set to expire at the end of 2026, and lawmakers from the seven basin states have until February 14 to agree on a water management framework. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation released its [own guidelines and strategies for water management](#), and if the negotiation deadline is not met, these could be the new operational guidelines. The Lower Basin States—Arizona, California, and Nevada—[rely on the water released from these lakes](#), and understandably, [farmers in California](#), even with the record rainfall, are nervous about how negotiations will fare for their irrigated crops.

All of it contributes to the growing insurance and housing crises that have come up in TUWaterWays in recent years. The [most recent folks to wax philosophical](#) about it also happen to be a couple of current U.S. Senators. Perhaps it's an indication that it's time for policy wonks and lawmakers to answer the bell being rung by scientists and actuaries alike.

Join Our Team!

[Hear Ye! Hear Ye!](#) Have you heard the news? An illustrious group of dedicated water lawyers is searching for a new member to join our team. Yes, that's right, the Institute is looking to hire a new Senior Research Fellow! If you or someone you know is a recent (within 2 years) J.D. or LL.M graduate (or will graduate this spring) with a strong interest in the legal and policy dimensions of water management and stewardship, this may be the job for you! The position is slated to begin in August 2026 for two years in the fantastic location of New Orleans, Louisiana, where it will not snow this week, probably. [Apply Now!](#)

Coming Up:

[Environmental Law & Policy Summit](#)

Tulane University Law School; New Orleans, LA; March 5–7, 2026

[73rd Mineral Law Institute](#)

LSU Law Center; Baton Rouge, LA; March 19-20, 2026

[Coastal Law CLE](#)

May 7 & 8, 2026; New Orleans, LA

Water jobs:

[Senior Research Fellow](#); Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy; New Orleans, LA

[Senior Attorney, Louisiana Clean Affordable Power](#); Environmental Defense Fund

[Deputy Director of Water Resources](#); City of San Jose, CA



The [Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy](#) is a program of the Tulane University Law School. The Institute is dedicated to fostering a greater appreciation and understanding of the vital role that water plays in our society and of the importance of the legal and policy framework that shapes the uses and legal stewardship of water.

6325 Freret Street, 1st Floor
New Orleans, LA 70118
504-865-5915
tulanewater.org