

No, Climate Change Is Not ‘Straining Budgets’ in Colorado Towns

Telluride, Colorado

By James Taylor

The Colorado Sun published a misleading and scientifically deficient article on November 6, 2020, titled “The High Cost of Climate Change Is Already Straining the Budgets of Colorado Towns.”¹ To reach that erroneous conclusion, the article’s author ignored real-world climate data reported by NASA, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

The *Sun* article chronicles recent drought and wildfires in Colorado, as well as an active Spring 2019 avalanche season, laying the blame for these events and their costs to local governments on climate change. However, objective data tell a different story.

Contrary to the arguments made by the *Sun* and other climate alarmist news outlets, the available evidence suggests climate change is not increasing the frequency or severity of events *The Colorado Sun* claims are straining Colorado budgets.

False Link Between Drought and Climate Change

Over the past few years, Colorado has experienced below-average rainfall, but the severity and duration of current conditions are not unusual. As shown in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chart reproduced in Figure 1 on page 2, periods of low rainfall occur in Colorado on occasion.

Colorado is currently experiencing one of those low-rainfall periods, but there is no long-term trend of reduced rainfall. In fact, the three periods during which Colorado experienced its lowest recorded amounts of rainfall occurred between the start of 1900 and the end of 1955. No period since 1955 has been as dry for Colorado as those three separate events, all of which took place 65–120 years ago, when alarmists claim global warming was nonexistent or much less severe.

The *Sun* article further states that due to climate change, streamflow in rivers and streams in Colora-

¹ Mark Jaffe, “The High Cost of Climate Change Is Already Straining the Budgets of Colorado Towns,” *The Colorado Sun*, November 6, 2020, <https://coloradosun.com/2020/11/06/high-cost-of-climate-change-colorado-water>

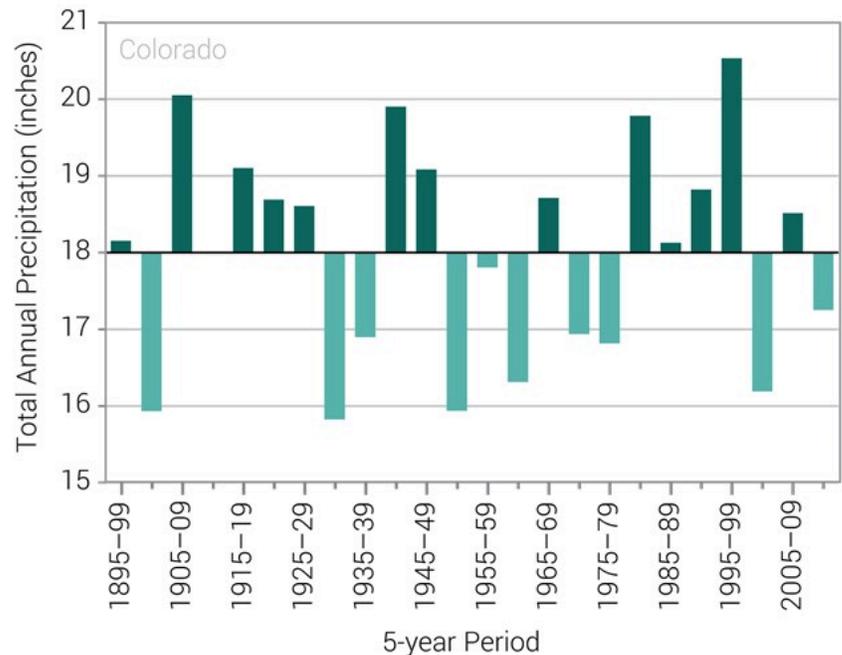
do has been reduced by 13–20 percent since 2000, compared to the average in Colorado for the twentieth century. However, the reason for the reduced streamflow is much more likely due to the tremendous population growth that has occurred in Colorado since 1900, as shown by the charts in Figure 2 on page 3. Since 2000, Colorado’s population has increased by 33 percent, causing water demand to rise.

Scientists at Colorado State University (CSU) have confirmed the causal relationship between Colorado’s population growth and reduced streamflow. As CSU scientists at the Colorado Water Center note, “Much of the state’s water history has been shaped by population growth. In particular, a tenfold increase in residents from 1900 to 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) was paralleled by a similar increase in competition and demand for the water in Colorado’s nine major watersheds and four major aquifers.”²

Global warming has not ended Colorado’s long-running rainfall cycles, but the fact that global warming is not *ending* Colorado’s periodic drought cycles does not mean researchers should blame climate change for the droughts that do occur. This is especially the case given that NOAA data clearly reveal that recent droughts are shorter and less severe than they were several decades ago.

Further, even if recent Colorado droughts were un-

Figure 1: Observed Annual Precipitation in Colorado



Source: National Centers for Environmental Information, “Figure 5B: Observed Annual Precipitation,” *State Climate Summaries*, U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://statesummaries.ncics.org/chapter/co>

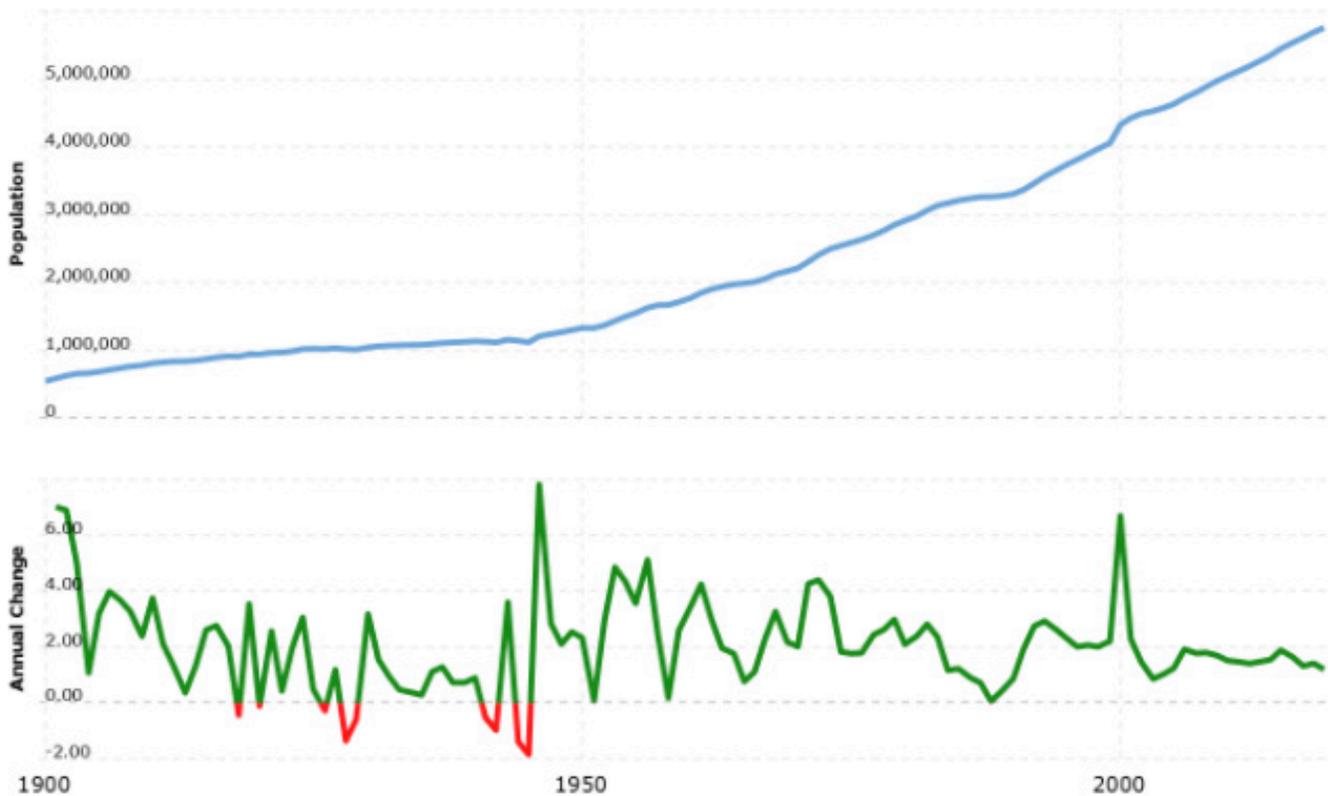
usually severe, it would still be improper to place the blame on climate change. The U.N. IPCC reports with “high confidence” that precipitation has *increased* over mid-latitude land areas of the Northern Hemisphere, including the United States, during the past 70 years. IPCC also has “low confidence” there are any negative trends globally related to drought.³

There is also no evidence the United States has in recent years experienced abnormal amounts of drought. In fact, the United States set a new record in 2017 for having the smallest percentage of its land

² Colorado Water Center, “Water History,” waterknowledge.colostate.edu, Colorado State University, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://waterknowledge.colostate.edu/water-history/#:~:text=Much%20of%20the%20state%27s%20water,watersheds%20and%20four%20major%20aquifers>

³ See *Climate at a Glance*, “Drought,” climateataglance.com, The Heartland Institute, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://climateataglance.com/climate-at-a-glance-drought>, citing data from the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Figure 2: Population of Colorado, 1900–2019



Data and Image Source: MacroTrends, “Colorado Population 1900-2019,” [macrotrends.net](https://www.macrotrends.net/states/colorado/population), accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.macrotrends.net/states/colorado/population>, citing data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

area experiencing “very dry” conditions.⁴ Then, in 2019, the United States broke the record set in 2017. Any regional drought that currently affects Colorado is bucking national and global trends, which means researchers should not attribute Colorado’s relatively short drought event to global climate change.

False Link Between Wildfires and Climate Change

After falsely asserting that climate change is caus-

ing more frequent and severe droughts in Colorado, the *Sun* article then claims that these droughts are responsible for recent wildfires in the state. While drought is the primary climate factor influencing wildfires, global and national wildfire data show there has been no increase in the frequency or severity of wildfires due to climate change.

U.S. wildfires in recent decades have been far less frequent and severe than they were during the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ Figure 3 on page 4, which shows data reported by the U.S. National In-

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See *Climate at a Glance*, “U.S. Wildfires,” climateataglance.com, The Heartland Institute, accessed November 10,

teragency Fire Center, illustrates these well-documented declines.

Moreover, NASA satellite data show a long-term decline in global wildfires. NASA satellites have measured a 25 percent decline in global lands burned since 2003.⁶ It defies all logic to blame an asserted uptick in wildfires in Colorado on global warming when wildfires throughout the world are becoming less frequent and extreme.

Finally, substantial evidence exists showing that recent wildfires in the western United States are likely, at least in part, a product of environmental activists’ strategy to push government officials

to impose unprecedented obstacles to sound forest management.⁷

False Link Between Avalanches and Climate Change

The Colorado Sun also argues climate change caused avalanches that occurred in Colorado in Spring 2019, even though objective data and the *Sun* article itself seem to contradict this assertion.

According to the *Sun*, the above-average Spring 2019 avalanche season was triggered by “early October snow that created a weak layer” of underlying

Figure 3: Wildland Fires: Number of Acres Burned in the United States, 1926–2019



Sources: National Interagency Fire Center, “Total Wildland Fires and Acres (1926-2019),” nifc.gov, accessed November 2020, https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/fireInfo_stats_totalFires.html. Graph by meteorologist Anthony Watts.

2020, <https://climateataglance.com/climate-at-a-glance-u-s-wildfires>

⁶ Earth Observatory, “Building a Long-Term Record of Fire,” earthobservatory.nasa.gov, NASA, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/145421/building-a-long-term-record-of-fire>

⁷ See James Taylor, “Heartland, CEI Press Conference Addresses California Wildfires,” *Climate Realism*, The Heartland Institute, September 18, 2020, <https://climaterealism.com/2020/09/heartland-cei-press-conference-addresses-california-wildfires>

ing snow, followed by “a steady buildup of snow in mid-winter, followed by a series of heavy snow events in March.”

Strangely, this argument by the *Sun* seems to contradict assertions typically made by climate activists, who say that global warming is *reducing* the amount of winter snowpack, and thus making avalanches less likely. Further, a later onset of winter would make early-October snowfalls less likely.

Based on climate activists’ own arguments, the very conditions the *Sun* claims caused the unusually severe Spring 2019 avalanche season will become less frequent as Earth modestly warms.

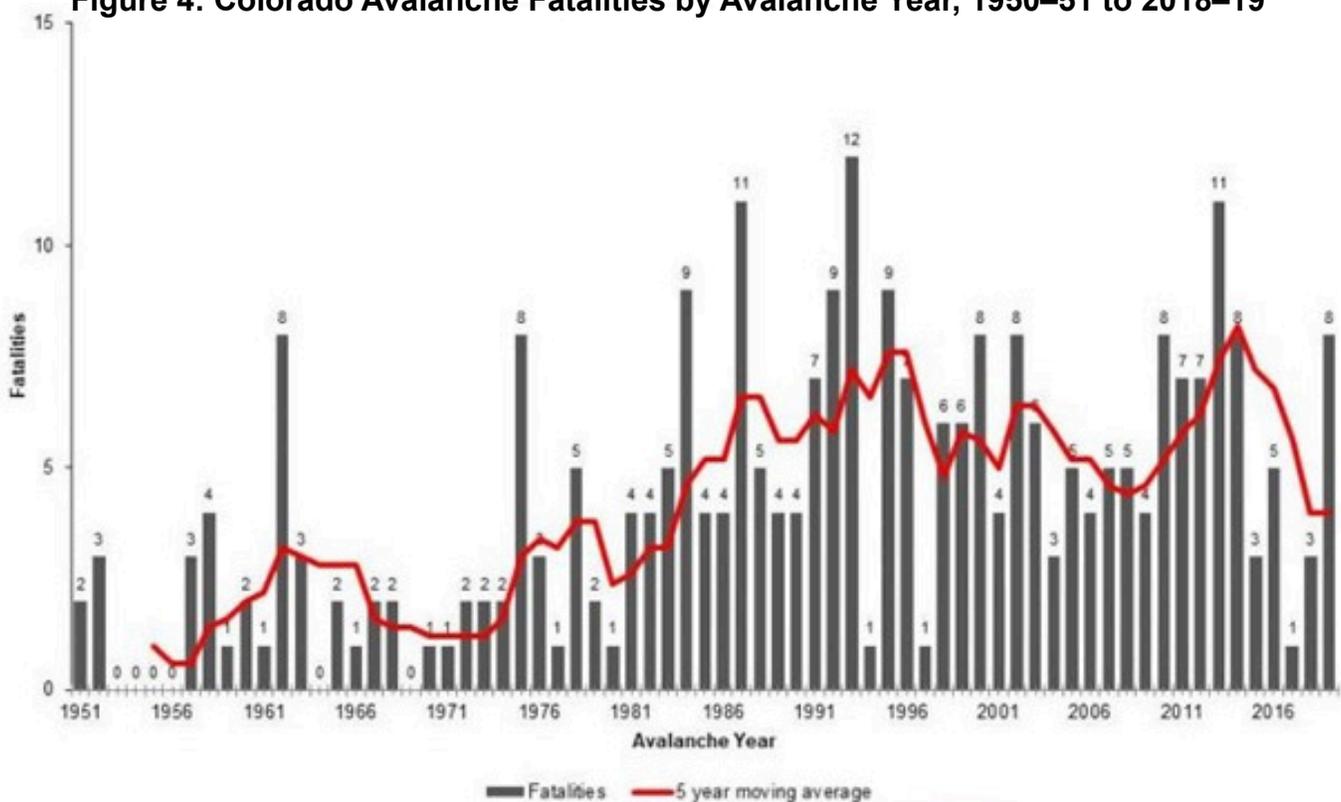
Moreover, despite a growing Colorado population

and a substantial increase in the number of skiers and snowboarders in the state since the 1980s, the Colorado Avalanche Information Center reports the number of Colorado avalanche deaths has not in recent decades experienced a notable increase. (See Figure 4.)

Summary

The writers and editors at *The Colorado Sun* may believe they have a moral obligation to promote climate action, but the claim that climate change is causing strains on local government budgets as a result of increasing drought, wildfires, and avalanches is thoroughly debunked by objective scientific facts, as this *Policy Brief* clearly shows.

Figure 4: Colorado Avalanche Fatalities by Avalanche Year, 1950–51 to 2018–19



Data and Image Source: Colorado Avalanche Information Center, “Statistics and Reporting,” avalanche.state.co.us, accessed November 2020, <https://www.avalanche.state.co.us/accidents/statistics-and-reporting>



About the Author

James Taylor is president of The Heartland Institute, where he also serves as a senior fellow for environment and energy policy and as the director of Heartland’s Arthur B. Robinson Center on Climate and Environmental Policy.

Taylor is the former managing editor (2001-2014) of *Environment & Climate News*, a national, monthly publication devoted to sound science and free-market environmentalism.

Taylor has presented analyses about energy and environment issues on CNN, CNN Headline News, Fox News Channel, Fox Business Channel, MSNBC, *PBS News Hour*, *PBS Frontline*, *CBS Evening News*, *ABC World News*, and other TV and radio outlets across the country. He has been published in virtually every major newspaper in America.

Taylor has also been a featured presenter at conferences sponsored by the National Conference of State Legislatures, American Legislative Exchange Council, Council of State Governments, National Association of Counties, National Foundation of Women Legislators, State Policy Network, CPAC, Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, and the European Institute for Climate and Energy.

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