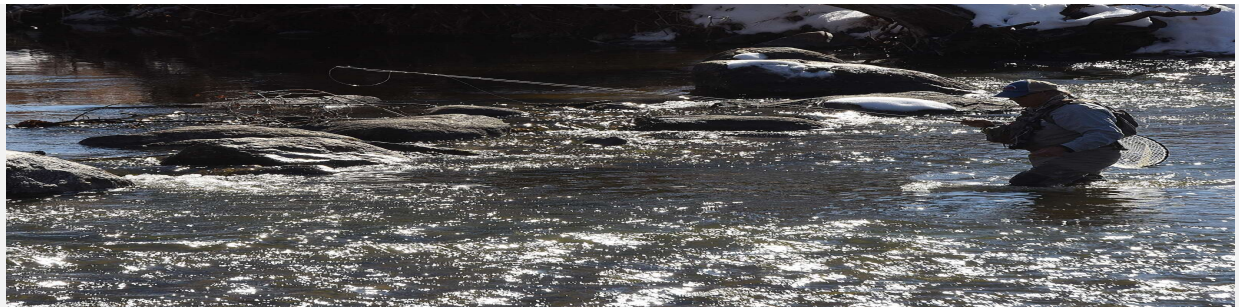


## Local officials join peers from 11 states pushing Biden for bold action on climate change

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[Dylan Anderson](#)



**An angler tries his luck on the Yampa River shortly after it reopened for fishing in November 2020.**

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — Amid a 20-year drought in Colorado, the Yampa River has been running low for years and late last summer was closed to recreation for just the second time ever because of low flow downstream.

Experts say without a dramatic and quick reversal of greenhouse gas emissions, the Colorado River Basin's flow could decrease by more than 20% by 2050. But the current drought is unlike previous ones.

Bradley Udall, a climate and water scientist at Colorado State University, said this current drought has been brought on by heat and not lack of precipitation.

“I always say climate change is water change,” Udall [told Yale Climate Connections earlier this week](#). “It means too much water, not enough water, water at the wrong time. It means reduced water quality. You get all of these things together as the Earth warms up.”

More than 100 elected officials in 11 western states — most of them from Colorado — signed on to a letter to President-Elect Joe Biden asking him to roll back many Trump-era climate policies and take bold action to deal with climate change while supporting rural mountain communities.

[Read the letter from more than 100 elected officials in western states to President Elect Joe Biden](#)

Since 1880 the average global temperature has increased by 2 degrees Fahrenheit and arctic sea ice is decreasing by about 13% per decade, according to [NASA’s Vital Signs of the Planet](#). Of the four vital signs the agency looks at, all are going in the wrong direction.

Biden has made climate change one of his top issues when he takes the reins from President Donald Trump, who has made deregulation a major focus of his administration.

“With the new Biden administration there is a real opportunity to regain the ground that we have lost on environmental issues,” said Sonja Macys, a Steamboat Springs council member who signed on to the letter.

Macys said over the past decade additional water has needed to be released from Stagecoach Reservoir just to keep the Yampa River alive because of drought. Macys said the city will be getting back the results of a community survey soon, and every year protecting the river is a top priority for residents.

To her, climate change is a philosophical issue, and Macys believes people have an obligation to reverse course on damage humans have caused to the planet.

“At the same time, it is an economic issue,” Macys said, adding that many people come to town to tube, raft or fish in the river. It can also be a health and sanitation issue, because wastewater is treated and returned to the river.

“No river, no toilet flushing,” Macys said.

The Mountain Pact, a group that works to bring together elected officials in mountain communities around environmental issues, organized the letter. Macys said the organization sent out a survey polling what issues were important to various communities and put the letter together based on responses.

The letter asks Biden to roll back many of the policies that Trump has championed as part of his energy dominance strategy. The officials want Biden to restore protections for both Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante national monuments as well as reverse recent oil and gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

“This energy dominance agenda has jeopardized both our public lands and public health while contributing to the climate crisis by causing the release of vast amounts of green house gas emissions,” the letter reads.

The primary focus of the group is regulation of federal public lands, the fossil fuels from which contributed to 22% of all the United State's climate emissions from 2005 to 2015, according to a study from The Wilderness Society, a group aimed at permanently protecting wilderness areas.

Officials in Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming also signed onto the letter.

Routt County Commissioner Beth Melton, who was among the letter signers, said while the county escaped much of the damage of Colorado's most recent wildfire season, which saw the three largest fires in state history, neighbors in Grand County did not.

The East Troublesome Fire started near Kremmling on Oct. 14 and burned almost 194,000 acres before it was finally put out Nov. 30. Melton said in conversations with commissioners in Grand County, they say the fire is not really over.

"They're looking at mud slides, potentially looking at losing more homes in the spring as the snow melts," Melton said. "These are really devastating and irreversible impacts, and we expect it to get worse. Right? That is what science is telling us."

Wildfires threaten water as well, Macys said. Most of the drinking water comes from the Fish Creek Canyon, which is surrounded by forests full of fuel for fires.

"When you look at the Routt National Forest, when you look at some of the compromised state that you see the trees in, should we have a catastrophic wildfire in our watershed area, it would be very difficult to sustain the quality of drinking water and the quantity we have been able to sustain," Macys said.

The county is currently working with municipalities to create a Climate Action Plan that will guide how the Routt County community will contribute toward curbing climate change. Melton said she expects to see that plan sometime early this year.

"It seems clear why the protection of our environment and the fighting of climate change would be important to the future of Routt County," Melton said.