

A Question of Balance

Photographs & Text by Elliot Ross for TIME

Tim Holiday high on a pinnacle above his family home in Monument Valley Tribal Park.

10 MINUTE READ
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In the Navajo Nation—a sweeping landscape of red-rock canyons and desert that takes in the Four Corners—water is not taken for granted. Here, more than 1 in 3 Diné, as Navajo people call themselves, must haul water to their homes, often across long distances. The Diné use the least amount of water per person of anyone in the U.S., and pay the most.



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Eighty miles away, residents of Utah's Washington County rely on essentially the same water supply, yet pay less for that water than almost anyone else in the U.S. and, until recently, consumed the most. The contrast reflects not only inequities of power and access. It also carries a warning that reaches beyond two arid communities. A megadrought has desiccated the American West, which is drier than it has been in 1,200 years. On June 22, the planet experienced its hottest day in recorded history, breaking a record set one day earlier. Dust clouds churn on the horizon. Much of the world may be headed this way.



Monument Valley
Goulding, Utah, is the economic hub of Monument Valley and the only place in the eastern reaches of the Navajo Nation with piped water and electricity.



Washington County
St. George, the seat of Washington County, is among the U.S.'s fastest-growing metro areas, with 1,416% growth in population since 1970

The problem, as old as the land itself, was predicted. The hydrology of the Colorado River Basin is highly variable, a fact that was not fully appreciated (or was flatly ignored) by those who drafted the foundational policy that governs water use in much of the West—the 1922 Colorado River Compact. Despite warnings from experts, the compact based the amount of water to be divided among its signatories on a brief period that proved to be one of the wettest in history. This flaw was compounded by tremendous population growth,

Indigenous dispossession, competing values, procrastination, and deadlocked disputes over how water is used.

Now the federal government is drafting a new plan, one that anticipates a drier future. Two countries, seven states, 30 tribes, cities from Denver to San Diego, and local water managers are hashing out the Post-2026 Operational Guidelines, which when finalized next year promise to set the world's most litigated river system on a sustainable path. It would also include significant tribal input, meant to address structural inequities in a water supply divided along racial lines. Indigenous communities, whose relationship with the federal government has been largely defined by broken promises, remain deeply skeptical.



Tim Holiday reveling the arrival of the first monsoon storm of the season. This region experiences the majority of its precipitation in the summer in the form of short-lived intense downpours. Without dams and other infrastructure, communities are unable to harness the water for human use. Photograph by Elliot Ross for TIME

On paper, the Navajo Nation is drenched in water. Under the "first in line, first in right" principle that defines water use in the West, the Diné have first dibs on the same -declining supply that serves Washington County, which has roughly as many people on one-tenth the land: the Colorado River, its tributaries, and two underlying aquifers. Yet little of it reaches them. In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in *Arizona v. Navajo Nation*, that the federal government has no obligation to provide water to the Navajo Nation. But then, the most important effort to exercise "first rights" was already in peril.



The Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project aims to deliver treated water from the San Juan River to 240,000 people via 300 miles of pipes. Conceived in the 1960s and begun in 2009, the \$2.1 billion project must be completed by Dec. 31 or the Navajo Nation loses its right to that water. It won't be. Hopes now reside in U.S. House Bill 3977, which would extend the deadline to 2029 and appropriate \$689.45 million to finish the job.

Washington County has a \$2 billion water project of its own—one of the most ambitious and contentious in U.S. history. The Lake Powell Pipeline would involve 13 pumping stations pushing water up 2,000 ft. across 140 miles. The Washington County Water Conservancy District (locally known as the District) calls the project critical to a population that demographers predict may double by midcentury.





Waterman
Water district general manager Zach Renstrom in Sand Hollow Reservoir. Cast as a villain in the water crisis, Renstrom pivoted toward an ambitious conservation plan.



Chief Toquer
The view across the future Chief Toquer Dam. When completed, a series of ephemeral drainages will form the county's sixth reservoir in the valley to the left. Adding to its expansive infrastructure portfolio, the District has collected \$32.2 million from the Biden-Harris Administration for its projects.

Here is a place drenched not on paper, but in fact. Thousands of swimming pools glitter like diamonds in a desert bounded by green rectangles of Kentucky bluegrass. A local economy embracing tourism promotes the comforts of an oasis: shady tree canopies, ornamental fountains, manicured landscaping, and a few miles outside St. George, a new \$1 billion golf resort—the county's 17th. News outlets in the 2010s put daily water consumption at over 300 gal. per person. Today, the District claims 153 gal. Either figure towers over the 5 gal. used daily by the Diné, who must drive miles over rough roads to collect it.



"Water is life," Monument Valley resident Tom Holiday says, waiting for the 300-gal. tank in the back of his truck to fill. "People in the cities take it for granted and water their plants and grass. Here it's precious. We think of water as a deity."

In places where water is scarce, living as if it were plentiful is no longer in fashion. The Lake Powell Pipeline is derided as a literal pipe dream by the conservation groups, tribes, and states that have delayed its approval. Under general manager Zach Renstrom, the District pivoted to water conservation, committing to a 20-year plan that will require vast sums of federal and state dollars, plus local fees, to maximize existing supplies; create a \$1 billion Regional Reuse System; and add 60 more miles to 275 miles of pipeline and 18 more wells, some up to a mile deep, to the 30 already in use. "We are wringing every last drop out of this lemon," says Brock Belnap, the District's associate general manager. It's impressive what a community can achieve when it's empowered by both policy and money.





Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project.

The Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project aims to deliver treated water from the San Juan River to 240,000 people via 300 miles of pipes—though its future hangs in the balance.



San Juan River

The San Juan River winds its way along the north-east boundary of the Navajo Nation. The Navajo Nation relies predominantly on the San Juan River which bounds much of the northern reaches of the reservation.

Washington County isn't the cause of the Navajo-Nation's thirst. The water gap is an enduring legacy of manifest destiny; the infrastructure, and legislation, that came with it still largely define how water is used. In the American West, irrigated agriculture uses a whopping 86% of fresh water consumed—the largest share by far going to animal--forage crops like alfalfa. Privately, a St. George resident told me, "Why should I compromise the things that bring me enjoyment when alfalfa is still being grown? I hate to say that out loud, but that's the reality." On the other hand, since 2002, water--strapped Southern Nevada, including Las Vegas, cut its use by 26% while adding 750,000 people—proof that measures like the Post-2026 Operational Guidelines really matter.



Map by Lon Tweeten for TIME. Getty Images

Moving between the two communities for a year, I found residents of Washington County largely unaware of the Diné plight, and earnest in their dismay. For their part, the Diné expressed neither surprise at how much water people in Washington County consumed, nor anger at the benefits that water brought. They just ask for the same opportunity.



Leaning against his wooden corral, framed by the iconic pinnacles of Monument Valley, rancher Billie Charlie put it succinctly: "We must prioritize humans, not corporations. Prioritize balance."

The Navajo Nation



Water For a Day

For a third of Diné households, simply obtaining water for everyday use at home saps enormous quantities of time and money. The Navajo Nation's infamously rough roads make water runs lengthy and wreak havoc on vehicles. Lines to fill at often far flung town spigots, springs, and wells can stretch four hours long. Here fuel prices exceed the national average which presents an especially acute burden for the Diné who earn about two-fifths of the average American and already pay some of the highest prices for basic goods.



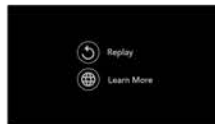
Monument Valley High School

The infield at Monument Valley High School is the only grass turf in the entire region—presenting a stark contrast to Washington County, UT.

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Water is Life. People in the cities take it for granted and water their plants and grass, here it's precious. We think of water as a deity. Water is living.

- TOM HOLIDAY, NAVAJO NATION NATIVE



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Dr. Tommy Rock, a Monument Valley native, has lost many family members to cancer—which he attributes to uranium exposure (thanks to the region's long legacy of mining). These experiences led him to pursue a career in environmental sustainability where, now as an assistant research professor at Northern Arizona University, he leads programs to test for contaminants like uranium, arsenic and fecal coliform.



Partnering with nonprofits, Dr. Rock has developed many of these springs into reliable sources by capturing water at its source and piping it into holding tanks that residents can fill from.



Sand Springs

Sand Spring is one of five springs in Monument Valley that are used by residents. With a long legacy of uranium mining in the area and throughout the Navajo Nation, water quality presents a serious concern as the Diné experience some of the highest cancer rates in the nation.



Eli Neztosie

On a brutally hot day, Eli Neztosie fills his family's cattle troughs, and gets a drink for himself, from his homemade water truck. The hardships of daily life have led many Diné to move off reservation and into cities with modern conveniences and more opportunity. "The way I see my remote way of living is not a luxury—it's a necessity," Neztosie says.



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"Without keeping the traditional lifestyle you lose the language, the heritage, the bloodline. It's the lifestyle that's the glue, the binder that holds it all together. That in itself is the biggest sacrifice. It's hard. It takes a lot of commitment."

- ELI NEZTSOSIE



Linda Jackson. Monument Valley

"My kids would say, 'Mom, did we ever have running water?'" Linda Jackson says. "And I would say, 'Kids, we did all the running.'" The average American uses 16 gal. to bathe each day. For Jackson, a whole shower takes 2½ gal., so in the bathroom built separate from her house, she just washes her hair.



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The tribal park told us we cannot plant trees because it'll ruin the scenery. We want to plant fruit trees to not have to rely on Walmart.

- LINDA JACKSON



Effie Yazzi

The Diné are 67 times as likely to lack running water as the average American, and spend 71 times as much for what they do get. Yazzi can opt to fill the 300-gal. truck-bed tank either in Goulding, 45 rough minutes away, where lines often stretch three hours, or fill from natural springs in the area, and risk contamination from livestock and uranium. The readiest access comes during

the summer monsoon months, when water sometimes collects in shady canyon recesses.



Ella Yazzie relishing a day at home outside the hogan her mother lived in.



Family photos line the wall of Ella Yazzie's home. Her family has lived in Monument Valley for generations prior to it gaining fame through Hollywood Westerns and the creation of the Tribal Park.





Effie Yazzie pulls into her yard with a full load of water during a long day of making multiple trips to fill the animal troughs and the barrels that surround her home.



Nolan Stevens, Cameron, Ariz.

"One of the reasons I left is because there's no economy here, no jobs. As a result, my kids grew up off the rez and they lost some of their identity. Down here, you see a lot of people who've given up, given up hope. They leave. So, I figured I should do something, and agriculture might be the way--to grow food for my community."



Nolan Stevens dips his hand into the Little Colorado River, the water supply that sustains his four-acre corn farm.



Most of the infrastructure is owned by the Navajo Nation—they have a monopoly. So farming is one of the only things a private citizen can do. Which is why I want to do it—to bring my family back to the land.

- NOLAN STEVENS





Daughter of Nolan Stevens, tkt [Eliot Ross for TIME](#)



Father of Nolan Stevens, tkt [Eliot Ross for TIME](#)

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Washington County, Utah



Sprinklers go off in St. George City Cemetery in Washington County, Utah. Encompassing parts of Zion National Park, Washington County is where the Colorado Plateau, the Great Basin, and Mojave Deserts converge in a unique abundance of biodiversity and postcard-worthy landscapes. This beauty most certainly contributes to Washington County's spectacular growth. Its population has grown 1,210% since 1970 to 197,680 residents as of 2022. The Kern Gardner Institute projects a maximum carrying capacity population of 950,000 people for this once-quiet Mormon agricultural county—a figure that water planners are building towards supporting.



A Developing Story

The growth of Washington County is defined by sprawling new master-planned communities like "Long Valley," a 600-acre development by D.R. Horton, the nation's largest homebuilder.



Lake Powell Pipeline Project

Morgan Drake and Brock Belnap, two of the people behind the District's Lake Powell Pipeline project, hold up blueprints for the controversial scheme that would involve 13 pumping stations pushing water up 2,000 feet and 140 miles to Washington County.



Receding

Over the course of the 24-year megadrought, Lake Powell has dwindled to roughly a quarter of its capacity.



LUSH FARM LIFE

"We need to learn how to thrive with half the water, two generations down the line," says sixth-generation farmer Randall Holt, silhouetted against a pile of freshly ground alfalfa. Alfalfa is the thirstiest of the crops that consume 86% of water in the West. Holt Farms LLC, one of the area's largest employers, relies almost entirely on groundwater in an arid valley that has seen some of the nation's worst aquifer depletion. In collaboration with the State of Utah, the

Holts are trialing a voluntary approach to water use that challenges the "use it or lose it" principle that defines Western water rights—trading consumption for flexibility in a cooperative effort to bring the system back into balance. In the Colorado River Basin, perhaps the most contentious debate centers on the question of whether agriculture should be allowed to use so much water.



Randall Holt and a pile of freshly ground alfalfa, ready to be compressed into cubes for export overseas.

“

We need to figure out how to survive with half the water, two generations down the line.

- RANDALL HOLT



Alfalfa is the thirstiest of the crops that consume 86% of water in the West. These fields that straddle an arid valley in Washington and Iron counties rely on an aquifer that ranks among the fastest declining in North America. In addition to trialing innovative water-saving policies, the Holt Family is experimenting with a wheat-rye hybrid called triticale that requires less water than alfalfa.






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“If you don't have food, you have a lot of problems. If you have food, you don't have one.”

- RANDALL HOLT



The Sand Hollow Reservoir at full capacity.



The Virgin River

The Virgin River, a major tributary to the Colorado River, courses its way beneath a new housing development in La Verkin, UT. Washington County is completely dependent on the fully appropriated Virgin River Basin which is especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Starting in the late 1800's, engineers began moving rivers to people in the American West. Today, 82% of major Western rivers and 99% of Utah's rivers have been altered by human development. In the West, the average length of rivers has been reduced by 84%, with 21% no longer freely flowing.

“

Why should I compromise the things that bring me enjoyment when alfalfa is still being grown? I hate to say that out loud, but that's the reality.

- WASHINGTON COUNTY RESIDENT





BLACK DESERT RESORT

With 17 golf courses within a half hour's drive of St. George, the contrast of green with the cracked red desert is a stunning sight to say the least. The WCWCD estimates that one in twelve gallons of its water goes to keeping all of this grass alive—a fact that contributes to the county's undesirable ranking as the thirstiest place in America. The love of grass and greenery in Mormon Country is cultural, and therefore, emotional. The prophecy of Isaiah 35:1 states, "the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose," has long guided the Latter Day Saints in their efforts beginning in 1847 to replumb many of Utah's rivers to serve their communities. In these dry times, one would think that using water for the recreation of the wealthy would be curbed, but in fact, the opposite is true.



Experts say that, when it comes to drying aquifers, Utah is a microcosm of global water trends.



For the first time in 60 years, the PGA Tour is stopping in Utah in October, at the newest of Washington County's newest of 17 golf resorts. In the final stages of completion, the \$1 billion Black Desert Resort boasts "600 acres of diverse terrain." Its construction within a lava flow has been controversial, with some residents asking, "How many golf courses do we need?"

“

When we see new construction, my wife and I say to each other 'I wonder what carwash is going in there?'

- JUSTIN FIFE, ST. GEORGE





The swimming pool at the St. George complex covers 2.4 acres, with a shoreline stretching a half-mile. Fed by groundwater, it is one of the ten largest freshwater pools in the world, in a desert county with approximately 2,500 of them.

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