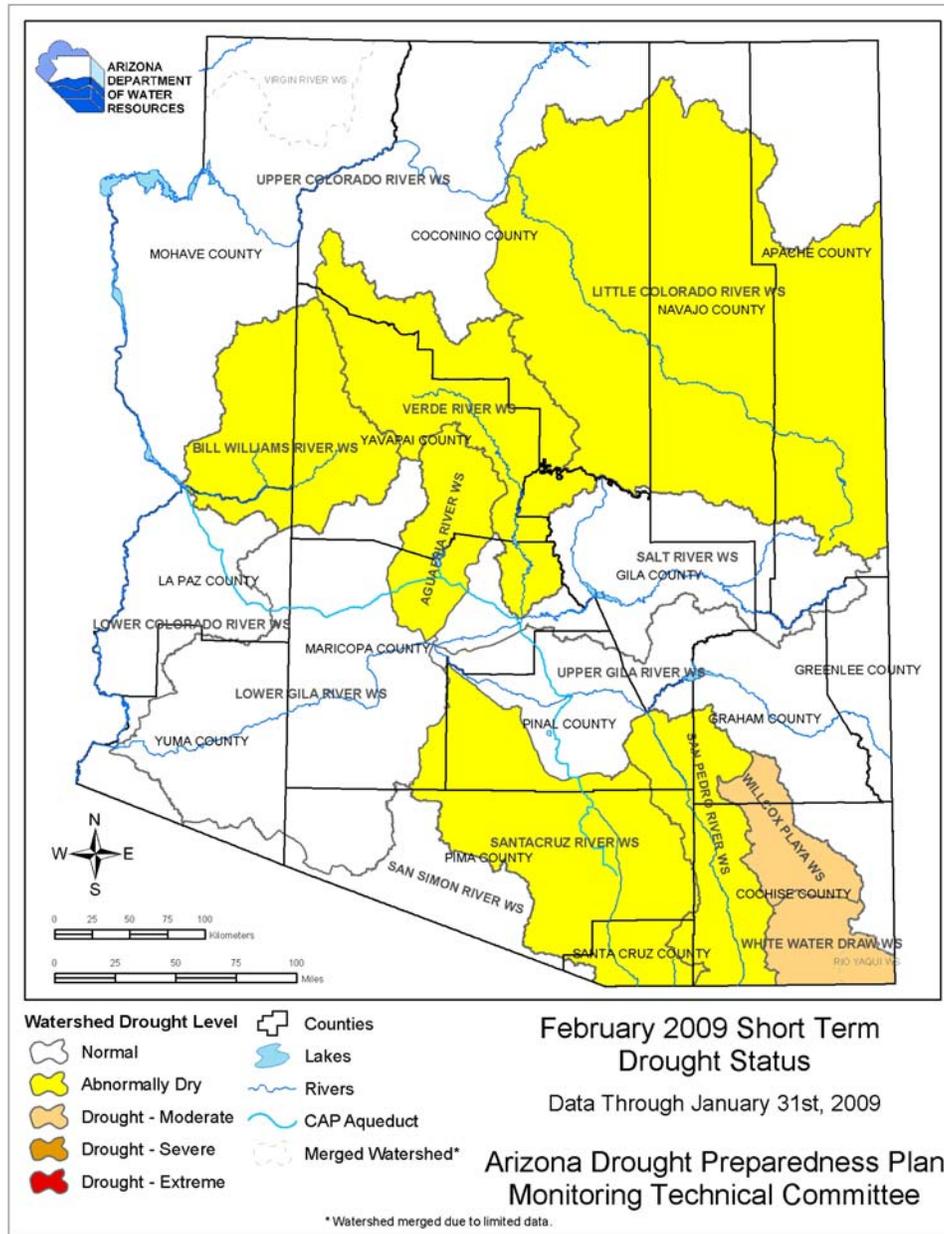


Drought Status Update

February 2009

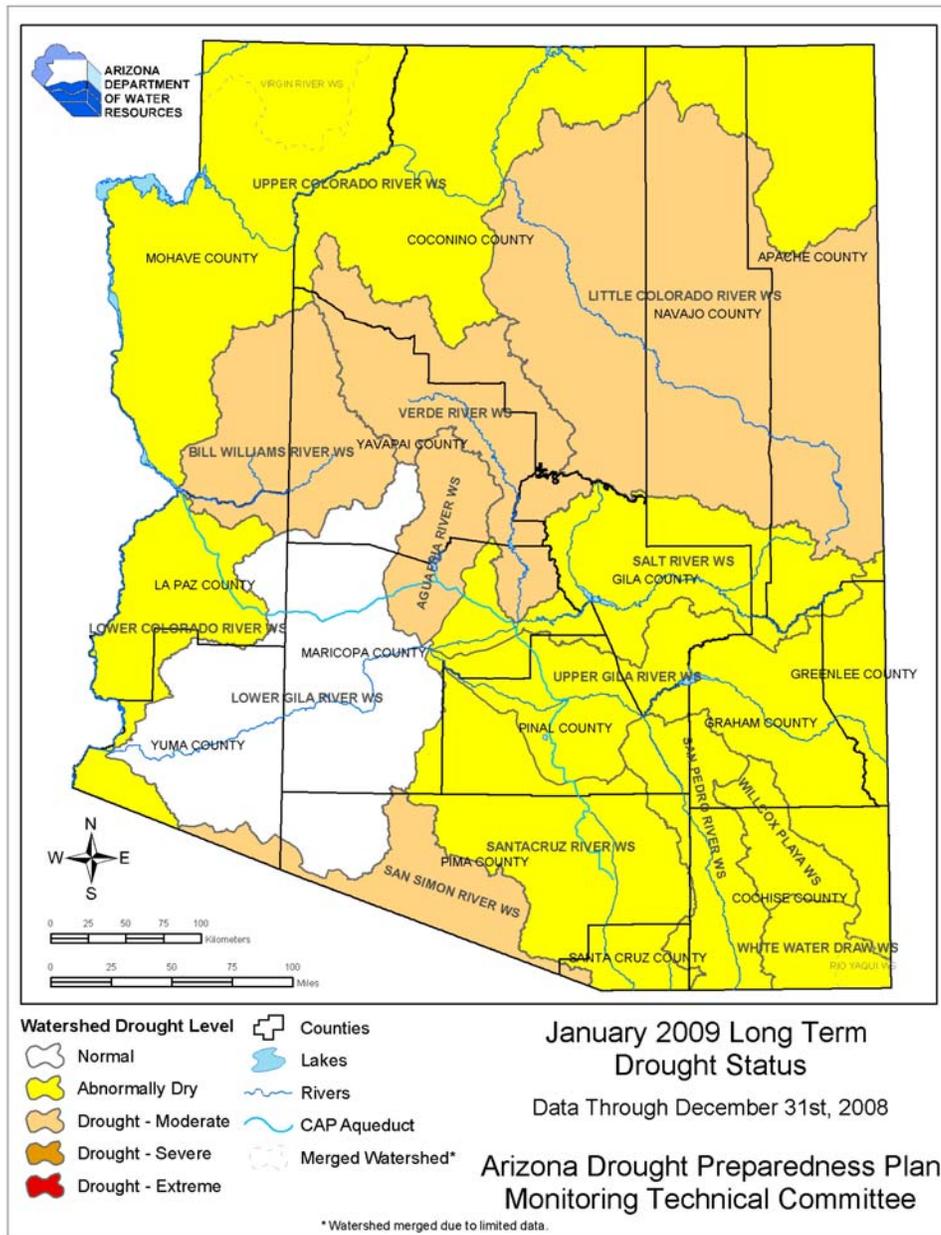


Short-term Drought Status Update

In the past three months, the northern two thirds of Arizona have had a number of winter storms that brought heavy snowfall to the middle and high elevations and rainfall to the lower deserts. Through the first week of January, the winter precipitation was well above average in all areas except the southeast. The rest of January was dominated by high pressure, clear skies, and unseasonably warm temperatures across most of the state.

The abundant winter precipitation in northern Arizona improved the short term condition of the upper Colorado River basin from abnormally dry to no drought. Unfortunately, the winter storms have mostly bypassed southeastern Arizona, leaving it hot and dry. Thus, the Willcox Playa and Whitewater Draw watersheds degraded from abnormally dry to moderate drought status.

Streamflow is currently above average in the Verde, Salt, and upper Gila River basins due to the warm temperatures that have caused early snowmelt. Early runoff usually means much lower flows in Arizona streams during the late spring, and is often indicative of the potential for extensive desiccation of vegetation during the pre-monsoon season.



Long-term Drought Status

The long-term drought status map will not be updated until April when the wet winter season is over. The map above includes data from the last four years, through December 2008.

Although November and December were very wet, the La Niña storm track finally shifted to its historic pattern, which leads to dry winter conditions in much of Arizona. Most of January was drier than average across the entire state, as was February, so this may signal a shift back to dry winters.

While the current high stream flows and full reservoirs within Arizona may seem to indicate the long-term drought is over, most of the state gets its water from the Colorado River system or groundwater. Colorado River basin reservoirs are still near 50% of capacity, and groundwater basins are generally slow to recharge, unless there is an exceptionally wet season, such as during 1982-1983.