

The western U.S. is staring climate change in the face. Most of the West is experiencing “severe” or “exceptional” drought. We could be [heading](#) into the worst drought period in centuries. Major dam reservoirs are down to record low levels. The region is also in the grips of a [record-breaking heatwave](#). We can expect another bad [wildfire season](#), maybe not as bad as last year but still bad. Power systems from [Texas](#) to [California](#) are stressed to their limits.

This is bad, but it’s not the worst news. The worst news is that the situation is only going to get worse as climate change progresses. If we don’t cut emissions quickly and dramatically, climate change will accelerate, putting droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires into overdrive. This isn’t end-of-the-world doom saying; it’s just the fact about the future of a big chunk of the United States.

The modern West is a human construct, dependent on a massive rearrangement of water availability across large areas. The physical and legal infrastructure of the West is geared toward a certain climate regime. At great expense and effort, dams, canals, and irrigation systems have been carefully engineered for a climate that no longer exists. To make things worse, the legal architecture is designed to favor whoever used the water first. That has nothing to do with who needs the water most — farmers growing rice in the desert have a stronger claim than urban residents. We’re going to be facing major economic (and legal) dislocations as the region adjusts to the new reality. That’s not even mentioning the toll that wildfires are going to take or the need to reengineer the power grid for greater cooling needs.

As I said, this is going to be bad. We really don’t have any way of putting Humpty Dumpty together again. We do, however, have the ability to make things much, much worse if we don’t get behind dramatic emission cuts.

Some people say they don’t believe climate change is real, as if believing in climate change were a lifestyle choice. Believe whatever you want. Reality doesn’t care what you think. And sooner or later, reality always wins.