

New Mexico's Elephant Butte Reservoir Hits Lowest Level Since 1971, Sparking Push to Expedite Refilling

Research identifies opportunities to conserve water upstream, improve delivery to Elephant Butte Reservoir and establish a protected minimum pool

ELEPHANT BUTTE, NM, UNITED STATES, September 1, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- With [Elephant Butte Reservoir](#) at its lowest level since 1971, New Mexico business leader and philanthropist [James Prendamano](#) is calling for a coordinated effort to identify practical ways to expedite refilling the state's largest reservoir and establish a sustainable year-round water level.

Prendamano, who is leading a rural revitalization effort in Sierra County, began researching the reservoir after watching its water level decline and questioning whether drought alone explained what was happening. He reviewed federal and state records, reservoir data, Rio Grande Compact requirements and water-delivery infrastructure.

He compiled his research into a 25-page working brief, [A Deep Dive into a Shallow Pool](#), which identifies opportunities to conserve water upstream, improve its movement toward Elephant Butte Reservoir, reduce water losses and establish a protected minimum pool.

"I approached this the way I approach any major business problem," Prendamano said. "I pulled the records, tested the assumptions and followed the numbers. The more I learned, the more



James Prendamano, New Mexico business leader and author of *A Deep Dive into a Shallow Pool*, is leading an effort to identify practical ways to expedite refilling Elephant Butte Reservoir and establish a sustainable year-round water level. (Photo Credit: J

convinced I became that there are opportunities worth pursuing. I want to put the research on the table, bring the right people together and see what we can accomplish."

Elephant Butte Reservoir was holding approximately 27,000 acre-feet of water in August, about 1.4% of its roughly 2-million-acre-foot capacity and its lowest level in more than half a century.

Looking Beyond Drought

Prendamano's research points to several factors that influence how much water reaches and remains in Elephant Butte Reservoir, including drought, upstream water losses, water-delivery infrastructure, invasive vegetation, evaporation, groundwater depletion, interstate delivery requirements and operating decisions.

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When one of the driest years in New Mexico history ends with more water in Elephant Butte, and a wetter year ends with less, drought alone doesn't explain what we're seeing."

James Prendamano

The contrast between 2023 and 2024 caught his attention. New Mexico experienced its 18th-driest year on record in 2023, yet water in Elephant Butte Reservoir more than doubled from approximately 225,000 acre-feet to 466,000 acre-feet. In 2024, precipitation reached approximately 93% of normal, while the reservoir ended the year with about 186,000 acre-feet.

"When one of the driest years in New Mexico history can end with substantially more water in Elephant Butte, and a much wetter year with substantially less, we need to understand everything influencing how water gets to the reservoir, how it is managed and how much stays there," Prendamano said.

Opportunities to Expedite Refilling

One opportunity involves approximately 70 miles of the Rio Grande between San Acacia and Elephant Butte Reservoir. The research calls for restoring the Low Flow Conveyance Channel and removing invasive vegetation that consumes significant amounts of water. Restoration would include clearing sediment and obstructions to improve the channel's ability to carry water toward the reservoir.



At the San Acacia Diversion Dam, the tools to deliver water to the lake sit idle. The Low Flow Conveyance Channel beside the river was built to carry 2,000 cubic feet of water per second to Elephant Butte Reservoir, but only a fraction of its 70 miles has

The research estimates these efforts could conserve approximately 37,500 to 45,000 acre-feet annually.

Prendamano proposes that at least 37,500 acre-feet of newly conserved water reach Elephant Butte Reservoir each year.

The working brief also proposes a protected minimum pool of approximately 200,000 acre-feet. Congress authorized a 50,000-acre-foot recreation pool at Elephant Butte in 1974, which Prendamano's research identifies as a potential starting point for discussions about a larger minimum pool.



A "No Wake" buoy sits stranded on the exposed lakebed at Elephant Butte Reservoir in New Mexico as crews work near a boat ramp in August 2026.

Another proposal seeks 100,000 acre-feet of water from the federal government related to water the research concludes was held upstream of Elephant Butte for roughly two decades. Under the proposal, 50,000 acre-feet would go toward the minimum pool, and 50,000 acre-feet would help reduce New Mexico's Rio Grande Compact debt.

Prendamano wants the proposals reviewed by people with the technical knowledge and authority to determine which can move forward.

"We have people in New Mexico who have spent their careers understanding this river, our water system and the Rio Grande Compact," Prendamano said. "I want to get this research in front of them. If there are ideas that can move forward, let's move them forward. The objective is simple: get more water into Elephant Butte and keep more water there."

Why Elephant Butte Reservoir Matters

On Aug. 7, the Sierra County Commission approved a resolution declaring a local disaster and formally requesting state and federal assistance to address immediate and long-term impacts. The effects are already visible. New Mexico State Parks closed Elephant Butte Reservoir's main boat ramp in August after two other ramps had already closed. Memorial Day weekend drew approximately 18,000 fewer visitors than the previous year, while Independence Day drew about 30,000 fewer.

The decline affects gross receipts and lodging tax revenue that helps fund local government and services. Elephant Butte Lake State Park was New Mexico's most-visited state park in fiscal 2024, attracting nearly 925,000 visitors. State parks in Sierra County generated an estimated \$124.5

million in economic activity and supported more than 1,200 jobs.

Water stored in Elephant Butte Reservoir also supports nearly 160,000 acres of farmland downstream, including areas known for New Mexico's pecan and chili production. Releases from the reservoir can generate hydroelectric power before continuing downstream to Caballo Reservoir for irrigation.

"Elephant Butte is connected to farmers, businesses, jobs, recreation, power generation and communities throughout southern New Mexico," Prendamano said. "I have a significant commitment to this community, and I believe in its future. If I can use my experience, resources and relationships to bring people together around something this important, that's exactly what I intend to do."

About A Deep Dive into a Shallow Pool

A Deep Dive into a Shallow Pool was prepared as a working brief for state and federal officials, water managers, local leaders and New Mexicans whose communities and livelihoods depend on the Rio Grande. The 25-page report includes research, data, methodology, photographs, charts and primary-source references supporting its findings and recommendations.

The report is available at: <https://www.jamesprendamano.com/post/a-deep-dive-into-a-shallow-pool>

About James Prendamano

James Prendamano is a New Mexico business leader, entrepreneur and owner of PreReal Investments and PreReal Prendamano Real Estate. During more than three decades in real estate, he has overseen more than \$1 billion in transactional real estate.

Prendamano is leading a rural revitalization effort in Sierra County that includes housing, hospitality, recreation and infrastructure. He serves as a voting member of the New Mexico Spaceport Authority Board of Directors, which oversees Spaceport America.

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