

What is the Carson River Watershed?

The **Carson River Watershed** is the land in Nevada and California that captures, stores, and releases rain and snowmelt to the Carson River. Its boundaries are defined by the mountain ridgelines that form a huge bowl or drainage basin. Distributed across the mountainous uplands, many springs and tributary streams form the headwaters for the Carson River. The Sierra Nevada snowpack is the principal source for both surface water and underground aquifers.

Unlike most rivers, the water of the Carson River never reaches an ocean. Instead, it flows northeast from the Sierra Nevada out onto the floor of the Great Basin, where the remaining water evaporates from farmlands and wetlands including the Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge in the Carson Sink. Most of Nevada, much of western Utah including the Great Salt Lake, and parts of California, Oregon, and Idaho lie in the Great Basin. No rivers drain to the ocean from this enormous, enclosed high desert between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada range.

The **Carson River Watershed** is slightly larger than the Truckee River Watershed to the north and the Walker River Watershed to the south. These three watersheds are quite similar in climate, topography and ecosystem characteristics. The **Carson River Watershed** encompasses portions of six counties: Alpine, Douglas, Carson City, Storey, Lyon, and Churchill. The Carson River is 184 miles long from the headwaters on the East Fork to the end point in the Carson Sink, and its watershed encompasses 3,966 square miles. Precipitation that falls within the watershed supports the plant and animal life, provides water for diverse human needs, and recharges groundwater basins.

The **Carson River Watershed** is located east of the Sierra Nevada range. Elevations below 5,000 feet in the watershed are located in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada. This is an area of low precipitation because Pacific storms drop most of their moisture as they pass from west to east over the high mountains. The Carson River is an important lifeline for all residents from its headwaters in Alpine County, California, to the Newlands Irrigation Project surrounding Fallon, Nevada. The rapidly growing towns of Minden, Gardnerville, Carson City, Dayton, and Fallon all rely on the natural resources of the watershed as do all farmers and ranchers in the region.