

Colorado: Overview

Everything in the main manual and the skill guides applies in Colorado exactly as written. What's different here is the specific hazard profile and the state, local, and legal context around it. This page is the starting point; the other three pages under Colorado go deeper on laws, local resources, and the data behind the risks named here.

The Marshall Fire: a winter grassfire, not a summer forest fire

On December 30, 2021, a fast-moving grass fire driven by extreme winds tore through the suburban Boulder County communities of Louisville and Superior, destroying 1,084 structures, nearly all of them homes, and causing more than \$2 billion in damage in a matter of hours. It remains the most destructive wildfire in Colorado history by structures lost, and it happened in winter, with the fire feeding on dry grassland after an unusually wet spring followed by an extremely dry fall, not the deep summer forest fire most people associate with Western wildfire risk. See the Risks page for the full data.

Avalanches: a standing, leading risk, not a single event

Colorado has led the nation in avalanche deaths for decades, and by a wide margin: 287 fatalities between 1950 and 2023, nearly double second-place Alaska's total. This isn't a single disaster, it's an ongoing, structural risk driven by the sheer volume of backcountry recreation in Colorado's mountains combined with the state's notoriously unstable, thin continental snowpack.

What this means for how you use the rest of this manual

The manual's Tier structure and the skill guides apply without modification. What's different in Colorado: wildfire evacuation planning matters year-round in grassland and wildland-urban-interface areas, not just during the conventional summer fire season, and anyone who recreates in Colorado's backcountry during winter should treat avalanche safety training and equipment (a beacon, probe, and shovel, and the knowledge to use them) as essential gear, not optional.

Sources

- Marshall Fire deaths, structures destroyed, and damage: Wikipedia, sourced to Boulder County; Colorado Sun
- Colorado avalanche death statistics: Colorado Avalanche Information Center; SnowBrains

Colorado: Laws & Legal Considerations

Rainwater harvesting: legal only recently, and still restricted for some properties

Every other state covered on this site treats rainwater as essentially unclaimed until you catch it. Colorado is the exception: under strict prior appropriation, rainwater has historically been treated as already legally spoken for.

Rule	Colorado
Underlying legal theory	Under prior appropriation, rainwater is considered tributary water that senior water rights holders are already entitled to; collecting it could interfere with their allocation
Standard residential rain barrels	Legal since a 2016 law, for single-family homes or buildings with 4 or fewer units, collecting from a rooftop for outdoor, non-potable use
Rural properties on an exempt well	Rainwater harvesting is legal only with a Precipitation Collection System Permit from the Colorado Division of Water Resources, under a 2009 law (SB 09-080)
Larger or commercial systems	Generally require an augmentation plan or other water court approval to avoid interfering with senior water rights

Why Colorado is a genuine outlier among every state covered on this site

In every other state covered here, the question is simply whether a permit is needed, not whether the underlying activity is legal at all. Colorado rainwater harvesting was effectively illegal for ordinary residents until relatively recently, specifically because the state’s water law treats every drop as already allocated to someone. The 2016 rain barrel law and 2009 rural exempt-well law were targeted exceptions carved out of that default rule, not a general legalization.

Where to find it: the Colorado Division of Water Resources (dwr.colorado.gov) administers rainwater collection rules and permits.

Water rights: prior appropriation, the doctrine’s original home

Colorado is where the American prior appropriation doctrine was established in the 19th century, during the mining and agricultural booms, and its waterways are frequently over-appropriated today.

Concept	How it works in Colorado
Governing principle	"First in time, first in right": the oldest water right on a given source has priority over newer rights
Practical effect	Many Colorado waterways are already fully allocated among existing right holders, which is exactly why new uses, including rainwater collection, can require special legal accommodation

Where to find it: the Colorado Division of Water Resources administers water rights statewide; Colorado’s water courts adjudicate disputes and augmentation plans.

Concealed carry: training requirement increased in 2025

Colorado requires a Concealed Handgun Permit, and its training requirement recently increased.

Requirement	Detail
Standard	Shall-issue through the county Sheriff's office
Minimum age	21
Training required (since July 1, 2025)	8 hours, including a live-fire exercise and a written competency exam
Renewal	A 2-hour refresher course including 50 rounds of live fire and a written test

Sources

- Colorado rainwater harvesting law history and current rules: Blue Barrel Systems; Colorado Division of Water Resources
- Colorado prior appropriation doctrine: Colorado State Engineer’s Office
- Colorado concealed handgun permit training requirements: HB24-1174; Have Gun Will Train Colorado

Colorado: Local Resources

DHSEM and READYColorado

The Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management runs public preparedness outreach through READYColorado, which started in 2004 as a Denver Urban Area Security Initiative project before moving under direct state management in 2011.

Where to find it: dhsem.colorado.gov/info-center/readycolorado.

CSU Extension: Colorado's version of the other states' land-grant Extension programs

Colorado State University Extension runs the same category of program as every other state covered on this site.

- **Colorado Master Gardener Program:** 60 hours of core training ("Green School," delivered online with live review sessions and in-person labs, November through March), requiring at least 80% class completion and a passing score of 70%+ on the final exam, then a minimum of 50 volunteer hours in the apprentice year (or 60 hours over a 2-year option) to certify, followed by 24 volunteer hours and 12 continuing-education hours annually.

Where to find it: extension.colostate.edu lists the program by county.

CERT: full training plus shorter alternative tracks

Colorado's CERT program, coordinated through DHSEM, offers something most other states covered on this site don't: shorter, more condensed alternatives for people who want some preparedness training without the full time commitment.

Colorado's tiered training options

Alongside full CERT training, Colorado offers “Be Ready” and “Take Part” programs, shorter, more condensed courses covering core preparedness skills for residents who can’t commit to the complete CERT curriculum.

Where to find it: dhsem.colorado.gov for statewide CERT coordination; search “[your county] CERT” for a local team.

Sources

- READYColorado history and campaign structure: DHSEM
- Colorado Master Gardener Program training and certification requirements: CSU Extension; Colorado Master Gardener Handbook
- Colorado CERT program structure, including Be Ready and Take Part tracks: Colorado Emergency Management

BY STATE › COLORADO

Colorado: Risks & Trends

Same standard as every other page on this site: every figure below is independently sourced, and figures that vary across sources, or measure genuinely different things, are flagged as such rather than collapsed into one number that looks more precise than the underlying data actually supports.

The Marshall Fire (2021): Colorado’s most destructive wildfire on record

Metric	Figure
Date	December 30, 2021
Deaths	2
Burn injuries	8
Acres burned	6,026
Structures destroyed	1,084 (97% residential)
Structures destroyed by community	550 Louisville / 378 Superior / 156 unincorporated Boulder County
Damage	\$2 billion+
People evacuated	37,500+

Why this fire is a genuine outlier

The Marshall Fire happened in December, driven by hurricane-force winds following an unusually wet spring that grew heavy grass, then an extremely dry fall that cured it into fuel. It’s a fundamentally different mechanism from the deep-forest, summer wildfires covered elsewhere on this site, a fast-moving grass fire that reached suburban neighborhoods with almost no warning, driven by wind rather than drought-dried timber.

Avalanche deaths: a decades-long national lead

Metric	Figure
Colorado avalanche deaths, 1950-2023	287
National ranking	1st, nearly double 2nd-place Alaska
Colorado deaths, last 12 winter seasons	62 (from 54 fatal avalanches)
National average deaths per year, last 12 seasons	~22

Colorado’s lead isn’t just about how many people recreate in its backcountry, it’s also about the terrain itself: the state’s relatively thin, dry continental snowpack is notoriously unstable, and weather events can leave lingering instability for weeks, longer than the faster stabilization typical in other snow climates.

What these two have in common

The Marshall Fire and Colorado’s avalanche toll both demonstrate that Colorado’s mountain and grassland terrain carries year-round risk in different forms: wind-driven grass fire risk in the shoulder seasons and winter, and snowpack instability throughout the backcountry ski and recreation season. Neither risk fits neatly into the conventional “fire season” or “storm season” framing that applies in most other states covered on this site.

Sources

- Marshall Fire death toll, structures destroyed, and damage: Wikipedia, sourced to Boulder County; Colorado Sun
- Colorado avalanche death statistics: Colorado Avalanche Information Center; SnowBrains