

Media Should Address Tough Questions about Western Water Conflicts

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This past spring, readers of mainstream American newspapers were greeted with a flurry of coverage over reports of projected diminishing Western water supplies resulting from climate change. These dire findings are occurring at the same time we are also seeing expanding water demand resulting from urban growth and environmental regulations.

An April 4, 2007 article in the *New York Times* focused on the desert Southwest, where growing population, politics and diminishing snow pack are driving billion-dollar efforts to grapple with critical water challenges.

The next day, the *Los Angeles Times* chimed in with a related story about a new study that shows climate change could bring about a new Western dust bowl. Computer models are showing a transition to drier conditions due to climate change. According to the *Times*, researchers insist we “better start planning” for the parched Southwest.

And on April 6th, the Portland *Oregonian* followed up with similar grim predictions for the Pacific Northwest. Researchers noted that more severe, warmer winter temperatures are projected to cause earlier snowmelt in the spring, which translates to lower summer river flows at a time of peak demand, especially in the irrigation-dependent eastern portions of Oregon and Washington.

In nearly every news article, reporters note that conflicts are already brewing between agricultural, urban and environmental interests vying for this critical resource. Virtually all of the media reports accurately portray the myriad of efforts contemplated or already underway to meet this challenge. Most also suggest that agriculture will bear the brunt of these conflicts, since ag water has become the default “reservoir” to meet growing Western water needs. The “solutions” which receive the most coverage are market-driven water transfer schemes, increased agricultural water conservation, and purchase of farmers’ water rights.

Although water transfers and conservation may, in certain years, alleviate water shortages, these resources alone can not meet the West’s long-term water supply needs. While these are surely tools that can assist in overcoming water supply problems, they cannot be viewed as the single answer to water shortages.

Holding on to our existing water supplies and building critically needed new supplies are of the utmost importance throughout the West. Supplies already can’t keep up with growing demands. Still, the federal government tells us that the dam-building era is over.

This is no way to run a railroad. If demands for water increase, supplies must also increase. This is simple reality, supported by population and demographic information, which cannot be ignored.

I guess we should be pleased that the big boy media outlets are at least beginning to focus more on the West-wide ramifications of these growing water conflicts. The problems that have concerned Western irrigators for years are now becoming hot topics of discussion in the media. However, very few of these reporters take the next, necessary leap of logic and ask the most important question: what are the national consequences as American irrigated agriculture and its water supplies continue to diminish?

The answer to this question could fill the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. Consider the following: The U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply, just as it needs a stable energy supply. The post 9/11 world of terrorist threats makes the stability of domestic food supply even more pressing. Farmers and ranchers produce food, steward the land, and tie down open space from development. The renewable economic and ecologic values they provide are superior to those associated with other uses of the land.

But ag land and its related values are already disappearing at an alarming rate. The USDA estimates that in 2006, total land in farms was 932 million acres, a drop of 780,000 acres from 2005. Those numbers will continue to increase, especially in the West, if policy makers do not wake up soon and find ways to protect this critical national resource.

The recent media coverage suggests that the public may be ready for exposure to this issue. It's about time.

Ironically, it's because Western irrigated agriculture has been so adaptive and successful at providing plentiful, safe and affordable food that it is now jeopardized – nobody believes there can be a problem. When the issue has never been personalized, it's easy to be complacent.

It's time for the mainstream media and our policy makers to wake up and start to seriously address this issue, before it's too late. Tough questions deserve thoughtful answers. Surely, those answers will lead to the conclusion that it is in our national interest to move away from long-term hypothetical processes that emphasize continued conservation and downsizing of Western agriculture.

An informed public must push the federal government to adopt a policy of supporting new projects to enhance water supplies while encouraging state and local interests to take the lead in building those projects.

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