

Pass the water, and the chips (poker chips, that is)
By Dan Keppen
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Water is a precious resource. In the arid West, it is especially prized. When the U.S. government wanted to settle the West, it gave promises of land and water to induce families to make the hard journey and put down new roots. The federal dams, reservoirs, and irrigation systems created in the past century allowed family farms to flourish.

The settlement of the West was so successful that towns and cities followed. Today, the cities and the urban population have grown so large that water is not available to quench their thirst.

Cities are not bad places. After all, most of us live in them. Unfortunately, some have found it desirable to pit the needs of the growing cities against the farmers whose forebears settled the West.

A recent classic example of such an attack recently appeared in *New West*, a website devoted to the Rocky Mountain West. The article, entitled “Western Water: A Legend of Overallocation”, was written by Hal Rothman, a professor at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

Every month 5,000 to 7,000 newcomers arrive in Las Vegas to retire or find jobs, and the already burgeoning population is expected to double in 20 to 30 years.

That sobering fact does not appear to concern Rothman.

“For every million gallons of water used, a single Las Vegas Strip hotel produces 550 times the employment offered by any Nevada farm, as well as more than 275 times the wage and salary payments of agriculture,” he writes. “The urban West would come out way ahead if it paid agriculture and ranching not to raise crops and animals.”

Farmers are described by Rothman as thirsty for water needed by other users, when it is in fact the products they produce—the food on our tables and the fibers in our clothing and homes—which require water. Much of this water later appears in “return flows” for use by downstream users.

Rothman ignores other considerations. While agricultural products are essential to us in the most basic of ways, they serve the country in other capacities. Last year was the first that the value of agricultural exports did not compensate for the growing manufacturing deficit, and our country failed to enjoy a positive balance of trade. Is it in the national interest, economically, to import more food instead of growing it ourselves?

The Europeans, who have starved within memory, understand the importance of preserving their food production capability. They recognize it for the national security

issue that it is. Do we want to rely on imported food for safety and security? Look at the federal energy policy for an insight into this scenario.

Farmers, city dwellers and environmental interests do not have to be at odds regarding the management of such a critical resource. We must recognize that cities cannot expect to grow at an infinite pace with an expectation of cheap water. We must recognize that solutions such as better water management and conservation are part of the solution. And we must recognize that the storage of water, including new storage, facilitates the capture of this scarce resource in times of plenty.

Hal Rothman is apparently preparing a second article for *New West*. We'll report back next month with our response to Mr. Rothman's "solution".