

Water Challenges Are Increasing in the West

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Earlier this summer, the Western Governors Association (WGA) released a report that attempts to identify Western water needs and find ways to meet those needs in an environment where demands are increasing on a daily basis. The report – entitled “Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future” – contains some observations and conclusions that may be disturbing to those who make their living off the land. In fact, I cannot let some of these findings simply slide by without responding. However, random objections aside, the main thrust of the report appears to boil down to an observation that should come as no surprise to rural Westerners:

In the future, we may not be able to sustain unlimited growth and still maintain our current quality of life.

The report offers up a half-dozen sets of recommendations and strategies intended to help Western states address looming water crises before they develop. It may be too late for some of these areas – well owners selling off their herds in northeastern Colorado, irrigators in the Klamath Basin fearfully waiting for another government-mandated curtailment of water supplies – but the WGA report provides some common-sense guidelines.

As hinted at above, some of the individual observations and recommendations are disturbing to western agricultural interests. While perhaps not intentional, there appears to be a bias in the report towards urban water needs. For example, the report correctly notes that as urban water use increases relative to older agricultural uses, the demand becomes more inelastic. However, it then concludes that “a farmer can forgo a crop year when water supplies are tight; a municipal water system cannot cut back or shut down without serious consequences to the community served.”

What?!

I’ll have to have the WGA folks down to Klamath Falls for a visit with some of my neighbors who had their irrigation water shut off in 2001 by the government to purportedly meet the demands of three fish species protected by the ESA. These farmers – my neighbors and my friends – were impacted in almost unimaginable ways when their water supplies were curtailed for one year. Hundreds of farm and ranch families without income experienced hardship trying to support themselves. Their ability to pay bills and service debt was impaired. The demand for social services increased. Some people simply moved out. Those impacts continue to linger today, five years later.

There are other areas in the report that also provide a bit of heartburn – such as emphasis on continued demand management over creation of new water supplies, and support for pending federal legislation that will provide questionable benefits to irrigators. However,

the good stuff outweighs the bad, and the good stuff is laid out in the opening section of the report.

We all know that water scarcity (relative to demand) is reality in the West, but so far, for the most part, storage, transbasin diversions, groundwater management, water transfers, and demand management have allowed growth to continue. Population increases create more water needs in urban areas, and public interest in retaining more water in-stream for fish and other wildlife has also put pressure on water availability for agriculture. The WGA report notes that, for the first time in some areas, legal and physical limits are appearing on the planning horizon.

“Difficult political choices will be necessary regarding future economic and environmental uses of water and the best way to encourage the orderly transition to a new equilibrium,” the report warns.

In most areas of the West, decisions about how and where to grow are rarely influenced by water policy or the availability of water. It’s really quite amazing, when you think about it. But it looks like we’re coming to a point where the future of growth-management efforts will increasingly revolve around natural resource constraints.

It is plainly and painfully true that there isn’t enough water to meet the needs of agriculture, urban growth and the environment. Increased conservation and efficiency can help, but they are only part -- a small part -- of the solution. And buying and bullying water away from farmers isn’t the solution either. Meeting the current and future water needs of the West will require a thoughtful combination of means, not the least of which are tightened growth management and the creation of new storage.