

**Pass the water, and the (poker) chips, Part II**  
**By Dan Keppen**  
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Last month, we reported on the first of a two-part anti-agriculture series that 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. This month, we have the pleasure of taking on the long-awaited “solution” proposed by Rothman, one that would replace the existing Colorado River Compact.

“The solution is simultaneously revolutionary and painful: a fundamental reallocation of the river’s resources must take place,” says Rothman. “We are an urban society that produces its wealth in cities and enjoys its leisure in open spaces. The water that once irrigated cotton outside Yuma now figuratively powers the Schlitterbahn, an attraction at a New Braunfels, Texas, waterpark.”

I was interested in what the members of the Family Farm Alliance had to say about this, so I circulated Rothman’s “solution” to water users in 17 western states. Here’s a sample of some of the responses I received:

- “First I wanted to laugh, then I wanted to cry, and then I got mad. Where, oh where, do they find these guys? Rothman’s writing is colorful, flamboyant, and his logic - followed to its ultimate conclusion - would destroy this nation.” (Sacramento Valley, California)
- “Stupid and shallow. If that is what it takes to be a distinguished historian then I have a chance too. Academia’s silliness is unmatched.” (Front Range, Colorado)
- “I tried a *Schlitterbahn* one time. It’s not bad with a lot of mustard and a beer...” (San Joaquin Valley, California)

In addition to these clever one-liners, some very constructive comments were offered up, which led to the development of this column.

Rothman’s argument revolves around the idea that a bureaucracy should be created to decide an omnipotent “simultaneously revolutionary and painful” solution for all water users. He neglects to state exactly who should comprise that bureaucracy (or who should be left out). He states that “there will be winners and losers and those who give up their water must be treated fairly and compensated in a uniquely generous manner”. He does not, however, identify exactly who will decide what “fairly” and “uniquely generous” means.

What Rothman is really suggesting is that water should be allocated based along the lines of a centrally-planned economy. The twentieth century is littered with such economies, whether they are the socialist/Marxist models of Central America or the Communist models of Russia, China, and Cuba. Why would Rothman suggest a model that has failed so miserably and consistently?

Granted, the transfer of water is surely one means of insuring that the West's most precious resource can be put to reasonable beneficial use to the maximum degree practicable. Although water transfers may, in certain years, alleviate water shortages, these resources alone can not meet the West's long-term water supply needs. New on- and off-stream storage, groundwater banking, and countless other forms of water development should be encouraged as a matter of policy and law. The construction of additional water supply infrastructure may allow more efficient management and enable greater cooperation between traditional and non-traditional water users.

The ag-to-urban transition that Rothman is calling for is already taking place in a manner that is more efficient because it's occurring through the free market system. He cites the example that water has been transferred from Yuma cotton to a waterpark in Texas. This was accomplished without Rothman's "law of the river".

The point is that these things can be accomplished within a free market economy that respects the water rights and responsibilities of all parties.

I don't understand why Rothman would want to abandon this system for a model based on centrally-planned economics that clearly and utterly failed during the last century.

You'd think that a history professor would know better.