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The perfect drought: Water shortages demand efficiency, new thinking

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Water. Without it, there is no life.

That's not news in the arid West. What is news is that the dual pressures of global warming and population growth are placing severe stress on fresh water supplies across the United States. Both the Southwest *and* the Southeast are enduring droughts.

If Americans do not get much smarter about how we use fresh water - and fast - the nation could face perpetual thirst that, in turn, could cause economic and population dislocation.

Don't buy that? Check out the Oct. 21 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*. The cover story, titled "The Perfect Drought," by Jon Gertner, is an excellent primer on the West's water dilemma.

Utahns will be familiar with the information there about our dependence on the declining Rocky Mountain snowpack, the effect of drier winters on the stream flows in the Colorado River, the bathtub rings in Lake Powell and Lake Mead, the battle over water in Snake Valley as Las Vegas plans to tap groundwater in east central Nevada and pipe it south.

What they may not know, however, is that in addition to conserving fresh water by tearing out lawns and replacing them with drought-resistant plants and installing low-flow toilets, we also need to rethink how we use potable water. It doesn't make much sense to pour it on our yards and flush it down our toilets. We could use recycled water for that.

We also must rethink allocating huge quantities of water to farming when land-use patterns in the urban West have changed so drastically.

If you're thinking that we can outflank climate change by building more dams on places like the Bear River, you might want to think again. Storing water in surface reservoirs may not be as efficient as storing it underground, where evaporation can't steal it.

In any case, it's going to require a host of different strategies for Utah to feed and water its growing population, and we're going to have to think outside the Bureau of Reclamation's 20th-century toolbox to get the job done.

To this end, Congressman Jim Matheson has introduced a bill instructing the Environmental Protection Agency to work with nongovernmental agencies on research to increase water use efficiency and conservation.

That's only a drop in the bucket, but it's a start.

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