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Limited Water Supplies Force Balance of Interests in US Southwest

By Mike O'Sullivan
Los Angeles
19 March 2005

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The Southwestern United States has faced several years of drought, highlighting the region's reliance on limited water supplies. Record rainfall the past winter has relieved the short-term problem. Officials in California and neighboring Nevada must balance the needs of competing interests, all of whom need water.



An irrigation system waters a newly-planted field in the Imperial Valley near El Centro, California

Much of the region is desert, and the scarcity of water has always caused tensions here. The American writer Mark Twain once remarked, "Whisky is for drinking. Water is for fighting over." The West has done its share of both.

As cities such as Los Angeles became more heavily populated, new sources of water had to be found outside the city. Officials looked to the north and east, bringing water through aqueducts, and storing it in reservoirs.

James McDaniel oversees the water system for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. "We like to say that if we depend on our local supplies, eight out of every 10 of us would have to move out of the area because that's how little local supplies there are," he says.

Most water used in Los Angeles comes from the Colorado River and the snow-pack of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, in northern California, which melts each spring to replenish rivers and

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streams.

As Los Angeles drew more water, there were environmental consequences. Owens Lake, in east-central California, was drained by 1928.

Further north, a 14-meter drop in the level of Mono Lake, high in the Eastern Sierras, sparked student protests in the late 1970s.

Frances Spivy-Weber is policy director for the Mono Lake Committee. "After years of litigation and public protests and bicycle rides from Los Angeles, people wanting to take Los Angeles water and pour it back into the lake. We won many of these lawsuits and then went to the state water resources control board, who ruled that Los Angeles had to share its water," she says.

In the 1980s, aggressive conservation cut water use in Los Angeles. Its population is still rising, but water official Jim McDaniel says conservation measures, such as limiting water for outdoor lawns and requiring low-flow toilets, have reduced water use dramatically. "In the city of LA, we're using the same amount of water as we were 20 years ago. The fact that we've added 750,000 people to the population, that's a city the size of San Francisco that we've added to our population and we're still serving with the same amount of water," he says.

Further north, restoration projects have begun to bring sections of dried up rivers and streams back to their natural state.

Brian Tillemans of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power oversees a group of scientists that is replenishing creeks and rivers that flow from the Sierras into Mono Lake and the Owens River Valley. "We're doing watershed management. Our goal as an agency is to be environmentally responsible while providing the city of Los Angeles with a reliable water supply," he says.

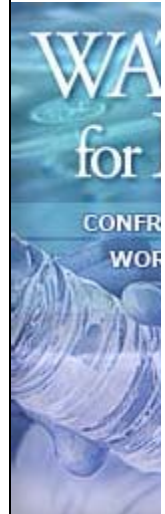
Today, wildlife biologists, botanists and water-flow specialists are bringing once-dry waterways back to life. Vegetation again grows and fish are reappearing in the areas now used for cattle grazing and human recreation.

The waters of Mono Lake are gradually being replenished.

In neighboring Nevada, residents are also dealing with water issues, but here the big users are farmers and ranchers.

Ed Snyder and his son, Jim, are fourth and fifth generation ranchers and farmers. Their family settled here in 1864, and Ed Snyder says, without irrigation from the river, this desert community could not grow any produce or support any cattle.

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"Without the river, there would be nothing growing here. Without that resource, we could have nothing to produce," he says.

Irrigation, however, drew off much of the water that fed Walker Lake. Its level has dropped 44 meters in the past century. Local retiree Lou Thompson helped organize a group to save the lake, but says many here believe that water is a resource to be exploited. "This is still, particularly in the minds of many of the rural people in Nevada, part of the old west, and it should remain that way. Very independent people, which is not bad, but there needs to be a little bit of more modern thinking, ecological thinking, when it comes to the natural resources than there has been in the past," he says.

There is no new water, only the water that now exists, which evaporates, falls as rain and snow, and feeds streams and rivers as it cycles time and again through a natural system. Those in the West with a stake in water may differ on some things, but many agree that conservation, recycling and better management will ensure that farmers, ranchers, and city dwellers get the water while preserving the natural environment.



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