

Western Drought Provoking More Than Water Wars

by Franklin Bell

What the U.S. Geological Survey has identified as the worst western drought in 500 years, is propelling the whole western region of the North American continent toward conditions for which financial oligarchs' anti-infrastructure advocates pine: drastic de-population of the North American West, *within this decade*.

The current drought doesn't stop at the United States' northern border negotiated with the British Empire, nor at the southern border of the Gadsden Purchase. The North American Drought Monitor, compiled by the American, Mexican, and Canadian national governments, shows "Abnormally Dry" to "Exceptionally Dry" conditions stretching from an area well above the panhandle in Alaska, to central western Mexico. Parts of Western Texas have been afflicted with drought for the past dozen years.

The 200,000-square-mile Ogallala Aquifer that stretches from South Dakota to Texas, and provides water for one-fifth of the irrigated land in the country, is being depleted 14 times faster than its normal process of restoration.

A 500-Year Phenomenon

A drought in the region in the 1500s lasted 50 years. And hydrologists say they have no certain way of knowing how long the current one will last. Colorado water officials say the Front Range from Ft. Collins through Denver to Pueblo has adequate water for *two more years*. What then? Year 2006 would be Year Seven of the drought in that area. By Year Nine—according to a 1996 study which examined worst-case scenarios—governments would have to declare statewide emergencies to manage the dwindling water supplies. "By Year 11, the drought could become all but unmanageable, perhaps even leading to mass migration from the Colorado River Basin," reports the Colorado mountain newspaper,

Summit Daily News, citing the study.

The 1950s Federal project that created Glen Canyon Dam and its Lake Powell reservoir in Utah, developed the Colorado River Basin that has made population expansion possible in much of the West. The Upper Colorado River Basin provides water to Nevada, Arizona, and California, and still leaves water sources upstream for Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico.

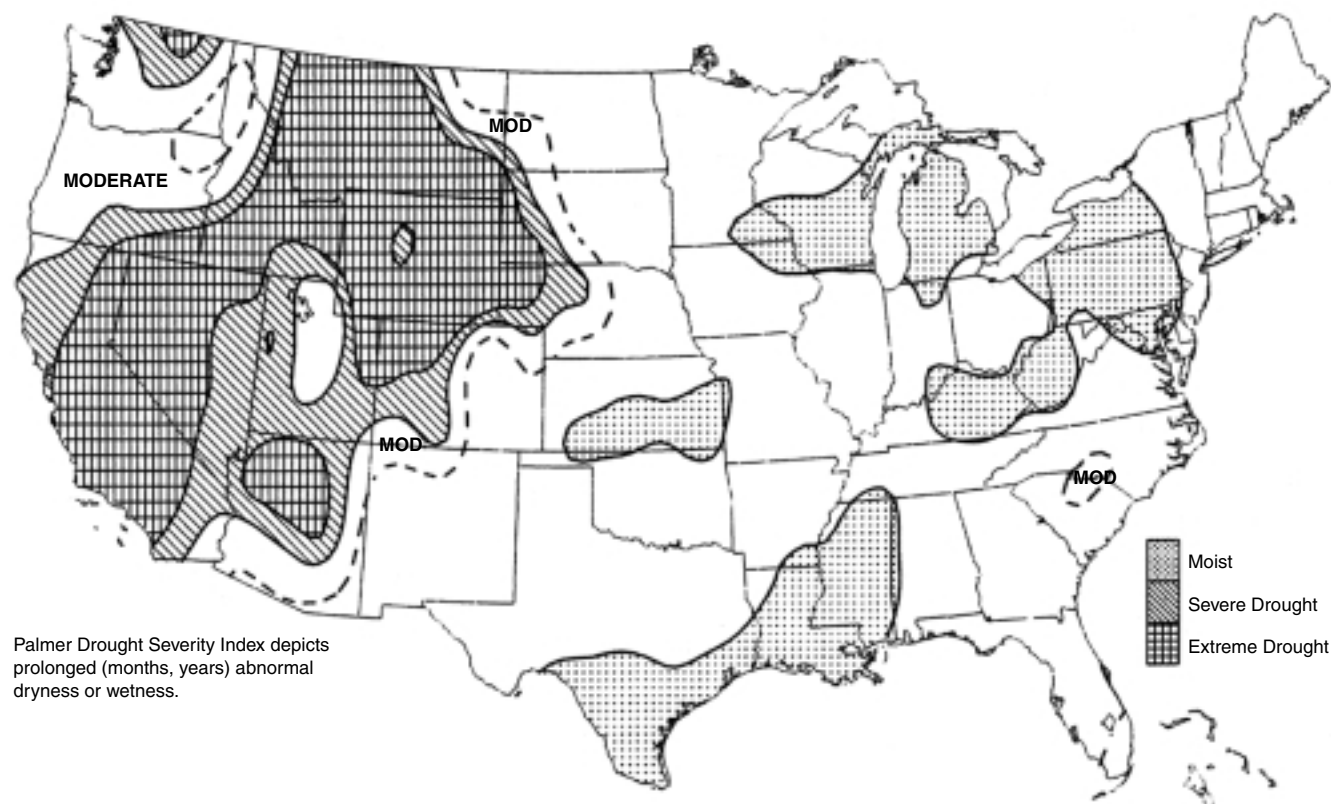
In early 2000, Lake Powell was 95% full. Since then, it has drained so rapidly that water experts say it may drop to "dead pool" levels, below which it cannot deliver stored water downstream.

This prospect really excites the environmentalist enemies of infrastructure. Under the headline "Drought Becomes Opportunity: As the West's severe drought causes Lake Powell's waters to recede, anti-dam activists take advantage," the *High Country News* wrote, "The drought also has begun resurrecting the canyon system drowned more than three decades ago by Glen Canyon Dam, revealing to a new generation of Westerners the environmental cost of their water and power. And by doing that, the drought has reinvigorated a quixotic campaign to mothball the last of America's high dams, and to drain forever the lake it created." *High Country News* says it is published "For People Who Care About the American West."

Against this backdrop, and with a Federal government opposed both to a nuclear power revival and to a Super-TVA infrastructure-development approach, local and state governments are left to fend for themselves. Some, like Wrightwood, California, a town 75 miles northeast of Los Angeles and 6,000 feet up in the San Gabriel Mountains, have declared water emergencies. In just the past few weeks, the water levels in the town's wells and reservoirs have dropped more than 20%. "They have predicted a 10-year drought," said the presi-

FIGURE 1

Long-Term Drought Severity Map as of July 24, 2004



Source: NOAA/USDA Joint Agricultural Weather Facility.

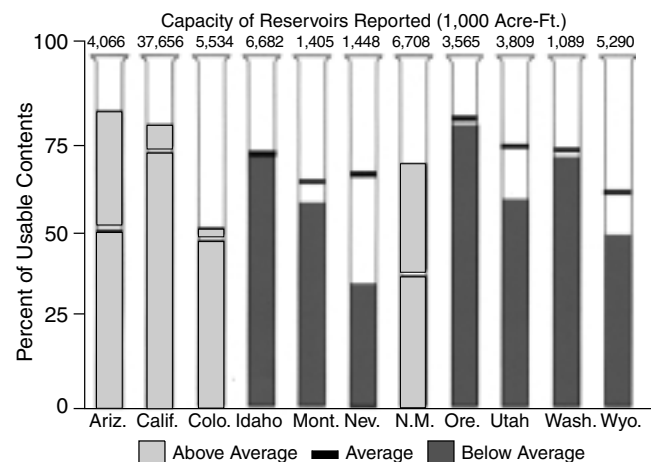
A vast area of the North American West is in the grip of what may soon worsen into a “500-Year Drought.” The real alternatives: Build a new western continental water grid based on abundant supplies in Alaska and Western Canada; or, soon, populations may be fleeing the West.

FIGURE 2

Falling Reservoirs Across the West

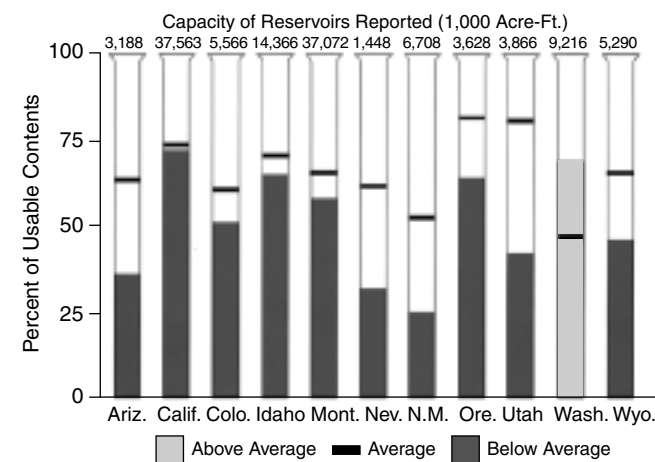
Reservoir Storage as of May 1, 1995

(% of Usable Contents)



Reservoir Storage as of May 1, 2004

(% of Usable Contents)



Source: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service.

States' water reservoir capacities have sunk steadily over a decade.

dent of the local Chamber of Commerce. “If that happens, we will be in big trouble.” The utility company that serves Wrightwood plans to ask the California Public Utilities Commission for permission to adopt a mandatory water conservation program that would penalize residents who exceed their rations.

Others, like the state of New Mexico, have put considerable power in the hands of one person to make binding decisions on water allocations. Last year the state legislature gave the state engineer the power to make those decisions *before* legal battles conclude their meandering through the courts. “The adjudication process is slow, the need for water administration is urgent, compliance with the interstate compacts is imperative, and the state engineer has the authority to administer—in accordance with water right priorities recorded with or declared or otherwise available to the state engineer,” the law states.

State engineer John D’Antonio began a recent *Albuquerque Journal* commentary by saying, “New Mexico is experiencing a drought, which is part of a natural cycle that will continue to occur in our state.” D’Antonio tried to assure people that, “My objective is not to threaten rights to the use of water.” But he then went on to say, “Part of the regulatory scheme I have proposed are provisions that allow for expedited transfers and replacement plans. These, in my view, are necessary components if there is to be workable priority administration.”

NAWAPA Strategy Now Urgent

Piecemeal “expedited transfers”—the supposed alternative to comprehensive development of the continent’s actually abundant water supplies—are about the most creative plans on the table. No reference is made, among state and local governments, to the feasible plans that have been on the books since the 1960s, for economical, nuclear-powered water desalination and diversion of abundant fresh water that now flows into the Arctic and Pacific Oceans from Alaskan and Western Canadian rivers. These plans—known decades ago as the North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA)—would allow all the nations of the continent to survive. Does John Kerry need better reason for his “cooperation with our allies”?

Instead, burgeoning metropolitan areas in the West are trying to find water wherever their lawyers can grab it. Most of the schemes involve super-deep wells in far-off rural areas, and hundreds of miles of pipelines, the means of water transfer least offensive to environmentalists. Ignoring what’s been on the books for decades, *USA Today* on July 31 asserted, “Generations from now, water for new homes, schools, and industry might come from other sources, even from new technologies such as de-salting seawater. But until then, often contentious plans for ‘water farms’ and pipelines are the immediate route to more drinking water.”

Las Vegas is proposing a \$2 billion such project, bringing in water from as far away as 250 miles. The *USA Today* article listed five other such projects: in El Paso, Reno, Salt Lake City, Colorado Springs, and St. George, Utah. None of these areas could sustain even their current populations without the Federal projects that years ago created Glen Canyon Dam and others.

Yet none of these local, water-grab projects has actually been started. Las Vegas’s would take a decade to build. But local officials know full well that they can’t count on the current Federal government. Just to underscore the point, Interior Secretary Gale Norton said in Denver recently that the Federal government has *no* role in handling water supplies.

The ideological basis for that insanity comes from the likes of the international financiers’ Ludwig von Mises Institute, a proponent of piratizing everything that might provide cash flows. On its website, Von Mises adjunct scholar William L. Anderson wrote recently, “The solution is not for the government to further assert itself, but rather to end the water socialism that it has imposed.”