

# Worldwatch Institute condemns United States to water shortages

by Nick Benton

Lester Brown's arch-genocidalist Worldwatch Institute released a highly publicized paper in January warning of an upcoming world water-shortage crisis—while asserting that conservation and free-market pricing of water are the only alternative to catastrophe.

The report is little less than treasonous in its call for the sabotage of U.S. water development, while acknowledging that large-scale projects are the methods by which Communist China and the Soviet Union are meeting their problems.

The 52-page report, which was given major international coverage when first released, debunks any large-scale development solutions. In fact, the report says, "Engineering complexities of traditional dam and diversion projects, along with their threats of ecological disruption, multibillion-dollar price tags and 20-year lead times leave little hope they will deliver water in time to avert projected shortages—if, indeed, they are completed at all." It opens by asserting that "given existing climactic conditions and current population trends, the per capita water supply at the end of the century will have declined by 24%."

On this much the report is generally accurate. Threats of depleted water resources confront this nation and much of the world as little less than a megadisaster. If anything, the report's prophecies of shortages are too mild and incomplete.

## The depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer

In the case of the North American continent, the report quickly identifies the case of the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer, which supplies ground water for irrigation of fully one-fifth of the irrigated cropland in the entire United States. This giant aquifer, that supports an area three times the size of New York State, covering six plains states, is now over half depleted and farmers on the land are facing higher pumping costs and diminishing well yields, in addition to low commodity prices and high debt burdens.

As a result, total irrigated land in Texas is down a whopping 20% in the period 1978-82, and 18% in Oklahoma. The total Ogallala area has seen a decline of 592,000 hectares of irrigated crop land in this period. Even in the northern part of the area, in Nebraska, where the water table has not fallen as fast, the per acre yield of the principal irrigated crop, corn, has dropped to half the national average.

Fully half all the nation's cattle and 22% of all its exports come from this region. Faced with eventual total depletion of the water supply, farmers' alternatives are reduced to switching crops, converting to dryland farming, or leaving farming altogether. The latter option is being chosen in record numbers, threatening the nation's economy and dinner tables.

Other crisis situations identified in the report centered on arid southwestern U.S. regions—such as Tucson, Arizona—the nation's largest city relying solely on ground water. Water tables there have dropped over 50 meters as only 35% of the water pumped out there every year is recharged. El Paso, Texas, faces a similar crisis, as well as slight variations on the same problem in Los Angeles and Phoenix, Arizona.

Similar problems exist elsewhere in the world, the report documents, such as in Peking and Tianjin, China, and in the central Asian republics of the Soviet Union.

In Peking, ground water use exceeds recharge by 25% per year, leading to a one-meter per year drop in the water table; in Tianjin, a major industrial city of China, the drop is as high as 4.4 meters per year. In the central Asian region of the Soviet Union, which includes more than half the nation's irrigated cropland, the Aral and Caspian seas are shrinking because of the large withdrawals from the rivers that feed them, and it is projected that that region will be 100 cubic kilometers short of water by the year 2000.

However, while the report insists that large-scale dam and water-diversion projects will not work for the United States, and that, in fact, there has not been a single dime authorized for new water projects since 1976, both China and the Soviet Union are going ahead with major water diversion projects to meet their crises!

In China, the government in 1983 approved the project to reconstruct the ancient Grand Canal, linking the Yangtze River in the south 660 kilometers north to the Yellow River, and then another 490 kilometers by gravity flow north to Tianjin—providing as much as 30 cubic kilometers a year as necessary to Tianjin, Peking and the North China Plain.

In the Soviet Union, the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers one year ago called for a detailed engineering plan for the entire 2,500-kilometer route that would link the north-flowing Ob River waters into the Amu Darya that flows into the Aral Sea. Construction could begin by 1988 as the Soviets

Table 1

### Selected cases of excessive water withdrawals

Region	Status
<b>Colorado River Basin, United States</b>	Yearly consumption exceeds renewable supply by 5%, creating a water deficit; Colorado River is increasingly salty; water tables have fallen precipitously in areas of Phoenix and Tucson.
<b>High Plains, United States</b>	The Ogallala, a fossil aquifer that supplies most of the region's irrigation water, is diminishing; over a large area of the southern plains, the aquifer is already half depleted.
<b>Northern China</b>	Groundwater overdrafts are epidemic in northern provinces; annual pumping in Beijing exceeds the sustainable supply by 25%; water tables in some areas are dropping up to 1-4 meters per year.
<b>Tamil Nadu, India</b>	Heavy pumping for irrigation has caused drops in water table of 25-30 meters in a decade.
<b>Israel, Arabian Gulf, and coastal United States</b>	Intrusion of sea water from heavy pumping of coastal aquifers threatens to contaminate drinking water supplies with salt.
<b>Mexico City; Beijing, China; Central Valley, California; Houston-Galveston, Texas</b>	Groundwater pumping has caused compaction of aquifers and subsidence of land surface, damaging buildings, streets, pipes, and wells; hundreds of homes in a waterfront Texas community have been flooded.
<b>California, United States</b>	Water from Owens Valley and Mono Basin has been diverted to supply southern water users; Owens Lake has dried up, and Mono Lake's surface area has shrunk by one-third.
<b>Southwestern Soviet Union</b>	Large river withdrawals have reduced inflow to the Caspian and Aral seas; the Caspian sturgeon fishery is threatened; the Aral's fisheries are virtually gone, and the sea's volume may be halved by the turn of the century.

Source: Worldwatch Institute, based on various sources.

are willing to spend as estimated \$18 billion for the main diversion canal, and \$23 billion for the facilities to distribute the water once it reaches its destination, to take water that would otherwise flow into the Arctic and put 25 cubic kilometers a year into the rich agricultural region.

#### 'No large-scale projects for the United States'

What a gross irony that while identifying these "great enterprise" projects being undertaken by China and the Soviet Union to meet their water shortage needs, the World-

watch paper condemns any such approach for the United States.

It does not even mention the one design on a similar scale to the Chinese and Soviet projects that has been developed for North America—the so-called North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA). NAWAPA is a plan for diverting the northern-flowing rivers of Canada and Alaska southward into Canada, the "lower 48" United States, and northern Mexico, bringing as much as 160 million acre feet a year as well as generating 70,000 megawatts of surplus hydroelectric power (see *EIR* interview with U.S. Senator Frank Moss, Vol. 12, No. 3, January 15, 1985).

To the Worldwatch Institute, such a project is unthinkable due to economic and environmental factors. What the report doesn't say is that "environmental" factors are simply a ploy to abort large-scale development projects by institutions, such as Worldwatch itself, which represent financial powers that require abolishing capital-intensive infrastructure projects in order to maximize financial looting practices!

In the Worldwatch case, it is willing to use a Soviet argument to justify the continued sabotage of development of U.S. water resources—even while the Soviets are launching their massive Ob River Diversion Project!

In asserting that conservation and small-scale "aquifer recharge" methods are the only options for the United States, the Worldwatch report quotes Soviet scientist M.I. Lvovich's book, "World Water Resources and Their Future," in support of its views!

The report notes that while the U.S. Congress has not authorized one dime to be spent on a new federal water project since 1976, and that appropriations for water projects currently under construction have dropped by 70% since 1976, Congress this fall did authorize 17 demonstration projects for "aquifer recharge." This is a method of drilling that allows water which might otherwise sit on the land surface and evaporate to percolate back into an aquifer, where it can be pumped out and used.

However, as Dr. Herb Grubb, director of the Texas Department of Water Resources, noted in an interview with *EIR*, problems that exist with this small-scale approach include the following:

1) A water supply is needed to begin with, namely, rainfall, which is the biggest factor lacking, for example, in the region of the Ogallala Aquifer; 2) There is a problem of the quality of water that gets put directly—through a well—into an aquifer without percolating through, which could result in contamination of the entire aquifer supply; and 3) It implies the cost of pumping the water out of the aquifer continues to be affordable.

The third point—cost factors—are also taken for granted in the report pertaining to all the conservation techniques proposed—from center pivot, drip irrigation, "fine tuning," concrete turnouts, and canal lining for agriculture, to recycling for industry and new model, low-water-use toilets and showerheads for municipal use.

Table 2

### Reservoir capacity in selected countries, 1970, with projections to 1990

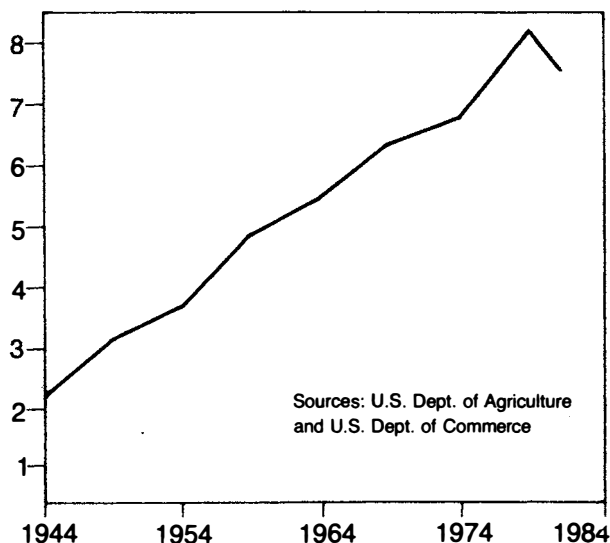
Country	Total capacity	Projected increase in capacity, 1970-90
	(cubic kilometers)	(percent)
Belgium	0.1	79
Bulgaria	2.7	296
Canada	518.0	—
Czechoslovakia	3.3	76
East Germany	0.9	156
France	2.0	—
Greece	8.7	78
Poland	26.0	127
Portugal	5.3	119
Romania	2.6	746
Sweden	27.1	0
Soviet Union	830.0	60
United Kingdom	1.5	47
United States	670.0	15
West Germany	2.3	—

Source: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, *Long-Term Perspectives for Water Use and Supply in the ECE Region* (New York: United Nations, 1981).

Figure 1

### Irrigation area in six states that rely heavily on the Ogallala Aquifer, 1944-82

Million hectares



What the report fails to note is that all these conservation methods impose a heavy financial burden on the individual user, which with agriculture, industry, and municipal budget conditions in as poor a shape as they are, means that most of these methods will simply be unaffordable for a vast number of users.

To the Worldwatch Institute, however, thrusting this burden directly on the user is the key to its policy. The report maligns the subsidy of water development which has encouraged expanded agricultural production, and treats the Amer-

ican farmer and his high productivity as an exploiter of the American taxpayer. "Farmers supplied with irrigation water from federal projects pay less than one-fifth the real cost of supplying it. Taxpayers are burdened with the remainder," the report says.

It advocates "pricing water at the marginal cost—that is, the cost of supplying the next increment from the best available source, so that users pay more as the supplies become scarcer." This nifty idea will obviously encourage conservation, the report notes. It will also encourage the destruction of the U.S. economy—a reversion to a Dark Age.

### Need for NAWAPA-style projects

In reality, the Worldwatch report underscores the urgent necessity of reopening the issue of a continent-wide crash program to develop NAWAPA, and to use similar "great enterprise" methods to avert the current famine in Africa by diversion of the Zaire (formerly Congo) River, the second-largest river in volume, next to the Amazon, in the world, into the Chad Lake basin for purposes of irrigating the Sahel.

Without these kinds of projects, the world indeed will be subjected to the kind of holocaust conditions one can imagine under the kind of policies the Worldwatch Institute proposes.

Time is of the essence. Worldwatch gloats over the landmark 1983 California Supreme Court decision making City of Los Angeles water rights to the Mono Lake basin subject to "public trust doctrine." This means that for "environmental" or other reasons, the 8 million people in the Los Angeles area can be denied water by the state's courts, a ruling reversing the American System principle established 200 years ago that asserted that if people need water to put to good use, they can have it.

This principle—built into U.S. law in direct opposition to British common law which affirmed the priority of the property title to the water, and thus the ability to block its use if desired—made possible the development of the United States westward. Now, this principle is being reversed in the interests of a new Dark Age.

The catastrophe that the Worldwatch report warns of is just the catastrophe that the Worldwatch Institute and its oligarchic planners wish to see.

While President Reagan has made miniscule moves to thwart this move to catastrophe—by disbanding the conservationist Water Resources Council and demoting certain conservation requirements implemented by the Carter administration to only voluntary guideline status—the commitment to the "great enterprise" approach, namely NAWAPA, remains the key.

Even while wealth-producing, job-creating factors associated with the development of such a project can be shown to be decisive to overcoming, rather than adding to, the federal deficit, the primary fact remains that an imminent water-shortage crisis confronts the United States as a national security crisis of the first order, and must be responded to from that standpoint.