

### Are We Ready to Change Our Thinking About Water?

Even with a major drought in the West and overdrawn aquifers everywhere else, it will take a change in our collective mindset to begin treating water as the non-renewable resources it really is.

Back in ancient times - the 1970s - I spent several seasons working in forestry as what they call a “pre-commercial thinner”. Translation: You spend eight to ten hours a day cutting down thousands of smaller fir trees, saplings and what are know as “whips” so that the remaining trees have room to grow bigger and faster.

If you love the sound of chainsaws, you'd be in paradise.

Since the areas where we worked were commercial timber units, the forests were all second-growth trees, the original old-growth first, hemlocks and cedars having been logged off back in the 1950s. Even so, there were hundreds of huge sections of logs, some eight or nine feet in diameter, just lying on the forest floor, often still solid and seemingly suitable for cutting into lumber, even a couple decades after they'd been felled.

I asked one of the foremen why appears to be millions of board feet of time had been cut down, bucked into lengths and then left behind. He said, “That probably had checks (cracks) or pitch rings, and back then, they only tool the clear fir logs to the mill.

It seemed inconceivable that such wastefulness could have been acceptable, yet that's what happens when any resources seems inexhaustible.

It happened with times, it happened with oil - remember the seven-miles-to-the-gallon muscle cars of the 1960s?

Now it's happening with water. Unless something becomes scares, we have a terrible track record of conserving natural resources. It's all about use it, abuse it and move on somewhere else . . . until there's no “somewhere else” available.

Even her in the Pacific Northwest, where jokes about the 360 days of glorious rainfall we enjoy every year are ingrained in the region's lifestyle, we'll feeling some pain.

A severe shortage of snowfall last winter has created a summertime crisis fueled by the depleted snow pack in the mountains, disappearing reservoirs, and historically low water flows in area rivers.

It has let to cutbacks in hydroelectric production, closure of fishing seasons, and restrictions on irrigation for farmers and growers.

Yet not one word from authorities about conserving residential water use. People still turn on sprinklers for hours on their lawns, blithely run hoses at full throttle to wash their cars and trucks and otherwise act as if they can't even spell drought, must less grasp its implications.

It reminds me of living in the Phoenix suburb of Tempe, Ariz., a desert climate where daytime temperatures in

summer routinely reach 110 to 115 degrees. Yet the majority of homes sported lush green lawns and lots of shrubbery, and the town voted to dam up the Salt River – which runs totally dry six months of the year – north of town to pump water into a manmade “Tempe Town Lake” of approximately 220 acres.

The net loss from evaporation off that lake was estimated at more than 1.7 million gallons of water . . . per day. That's right: Close to two millions gallons of water lost.

Of course, local officials touted the project as “conservation measure”, to store water that otherwise would be “wasted” when the big dam on the upper Salt River filled up. Only one problem: That reservoir overflows about as often as Donald Trump says something reasonable. Which is to say very, very rarely.

#### A change in thinking

Truth is that much of our urban and rural water capture, containment and distribution infrastructure is aging or even obsolete. As previously noted, replacing and upgrading those systems carries a 10-figured price tag.

But the larger problem is that as an industry, as a society, we need to make the shift from thinking of water as merely something that run out of a faucet and down the drain to understanding that it's neither inexhaustible or easily renewal.

Once upon a time we thought we'd never run out of virgin forest, and the massive logs left behind on those long-ago timber thinning units testified to such a mindset still in pace within our lifelines.

Likewise, there was a time when gas was three dollars a gallon, not three dollars a gallon, and so driving a car that got exceptional mileage wasn't even an after-thought. Who cares when you can fill up your tank for a couple of bucks.

But as aquifers are pumped out faster than they can recharges, as water tables in farm country continue to drop and as once might rivers like the Colorado now run dry before they hit the sea because billions of gallons are siphoned out to water laws and green up golf course in Arizona, we're going to have to accept that, like oil, water requires conscious conservation and far more efficient usage.

It's going to take time, but it needs to happen if farming and livestock production are going to maintain their viability as population and commercial pressures further impact limited water supplies.

And we could do without more lakes in the middle of one of the country's largest deserts.

– Don Murphy, a contributing columnist for *Drovers CattleNetwork*, published in *Scott County Record*, 8/27/2015