

POLITICS AS USUAL: Water, Water Everywhere

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Have you bought any almonds lately? If so, did you have a case of extreme sticker shock when you got to the cash register? It seemed like overnight the price of these popular nuts doubled. It should not have been a surprise though, given recent reports on what's happening in California ? an extraordinary and prolonged period of drought.

According to Ecowatch, almost 60% of the state of California is in ?exceptional drought? conditions. That is the worst it can get on their gradient of drought conditions. It's positively desert-like. Worse still, fully 80% is in ?severe? drought and at least four other surrounding states are in similarly significant drought conditions.

There is simply no water. A combination of a smaller than usual snowpack and little or no precipitation has resulted in no water to refill their aqueducts, no regeneration of the aquifers, no groundwater recharge. There are herculean legislative efforts underway in California to try to protect the very little water that they have left. The California Governor issued an executive order, requiring a mandatory 25% reduction in water use across the state (though, controversially, it does not apply equally to the agricultural industry).

Folks are ripping up their lawns and putting in drought tolerant plants. Pools and water features are being drained. There is recognition ? finally ? that water is a finite and precious resource that should not be wasted.

Is it just me, or is it somewhat ironic that the U.S. is experiencing one of the worst droughts ever in the final year of the UN declared International Water Decade? The magnitude of the drought, of course, is unprecedented, but the drought itself was not unexpected. I guess it takes a crisis to get folks to see the obvious.

While the situation in the Southwest U.S. is deeply concerning from both an economic and environmental perspective, aside from a painful pinch in our wallets, what does this really mean to us here in the water rich Great Lakes region of Canada?

It means that, once again, our water will be under threat. Over the past few decades there have been numerous efforts by various actors, both public and private, to gain access to Great Lake water to serve the needs of the parched southern U.S. and foreign buyers.

There are concerns that there will be renewed calls for ?sharing? our water with our neighbours to the south; specifically a renewed call for a Great Lakes water pipeline.

But it's unlikely that will ever occur. The big brick wall that protects our water is the Great Lakes Compact, a joint agreement between Canada and the U.S. that prevents any and all diversions.

What it does NOT prevent is water extraction ? removing water for bottled water in other words. Containers of water 5.8 gallons or less are exempt from the Compact's restrictions. Policy makers assure us that in terms of volume and impact, the exemption has little effect on our water supply.

I'm not so sure. Millions and millions of bottles of water are sold every year. A large portion of that water comes from our Great Lakes. It seems obvious to me that eventually that amount of water extraction will take its toll. So the exemption seems like a pretty big loophole in need of a plug.

Our fearless leaders need to close the loopholes in legislation and strengthen source water protection now and for our future.