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edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

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Weekend Edition
May 31 / June 1, 2008

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Going Dry in Sacramento

Will There be Water Riots?

By SETH SANDRONSKY

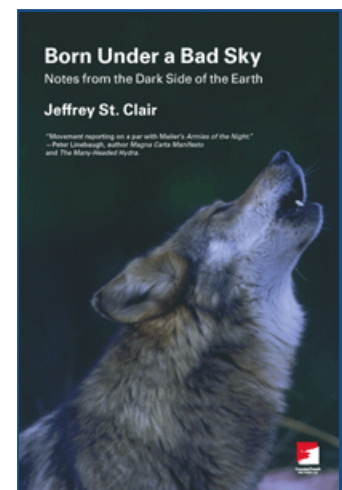
A suburb of 109,000 people in Placer County, 16 northeast of Sacramento on Interstate 80, the city of Roseville's demand for water from the American River via Folsom Lake outstrips the supply. Why? Blame last year's drought plus a rain- and snow-free March and April.

"We had hoped for a full rainfall this winter," said Lisa Amaral, water conservation manager for the city of Roseville. "Then snowfall, 121 percent of normal this January, evaporated into the ground from the early and warm weather."

In mid-Feb., the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation sent letters to cities from Bakersfield to Redding, its water customers in the federal Central Valley Project. The CVP was begun in 1935 partly to move water from the northern Central Valley to its southern part to help agribusiness.

The BoR letter to Roseville said to brace for an annual cut of 25 percent in the city's 2008 water supply from Folsom Lake, based on its annual forecast of historical rain fall and snowpack data from California's Dept. of Water Resources, said BoR spokesman Jeff McCracken.

Roseville's 2008's deficit amounts to 1,200 acre feet of water. That is equal to the amount of water which 1,600 residential households use in one year. (An acre foot of water is one acre of land covered with one foot of water, or 325,851 gallons.)



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Roseville, which gets 400 acre feet of water from groundwater, also buys 10,000 acre feet of water annually from the Placer County Water District, a county-wide agency. Its contract with Roseville has options to sell it 20,000 acre feet of water from the Hell Hole and French Meadow reservoirs on the middle fork of the American River, said Brain Martin, director of technical services for the PCWD.

Still on April 29, Roseville announced that it was launching voluntary water reduction measures this year, officially a "Stage One conservation alert."

"We are asking our residents and businesses to do their part and make changes in their water use to achieve a 10 percent reduction in 2008," said Derrick Whitehead, director of Roseville's Environmental Utilities, the public water entity.

To this end, the city is educating residents to irrigate their lawns less, take shorter showers, and employ low-flow water devices. Roseville is also hiring two temporary employees to expand the city's outreach program. The new hires, hired from May to September, are working with the existing staff to contact water users on various voluntary measures.

To this end, enforcement is also a part of the city's campaign. Meet Roseville's "water waste patrols." They focus on residents' use of water under the city's municipal code and current conservation policy. This bans hosing down buildings, driveways, parking lots and sidewalks unless it's required for public health. Restaurant workers are to serve customers water only when they request it.

Roseville's water conservation plan has four additional and mandatory steps if volunteerism does not solve the current supply and demand problem. Stages two through five would mandate reducing water by increments of 10 percent each.

Roseville is the first community in the Sacramento region to pursue a policy of voluntary water conservation. The city's residential customers, 89 percent of consumers, use half the water supply, Amaral said. The city's nonresidential water users are 11 percent and consume the other 50 percent of the resource.

Roseville operates under California's Urban Water Management Planning Act of 1983. The Act, amended many times over 25 years, states that "every urban water supplier should make every effort to ensure the appropriate level of reliability in its water service sufficient to meet the needs of its various categories of customers during normal, dry, and multiple dry water years."

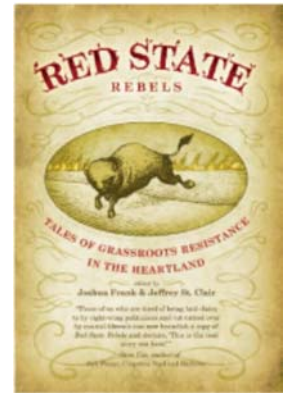
In addition to this law, there is the factor of consumer motivation.

"Volunteer water reduction has had mixed success when folks are convinced to be more careful with water," said Ron Stork, senior policy advocate for the Friends of the River, which calls itself "California's statewide river conservation organization."

On that note, there are limits to how much individual water consumers can do, according to Joe Medeiros, a professor of environmental science at Sierra College.

"It cracks me up when municipalities ask users to cut back on their water usage," he said. "That's only makes sense if agriculture, which uses 80 percent of the developed water in California, does its fair share, too. Otherwise, agriculture sounds like a sacred cow."

And a cash cow? Over-all agricultural activity accounted for \$57.7 billion of California's \$1.5 trillion economy in 2005 versus \$53.6 billion of \$1.4 trillion in 2004, the California Dept. of Finance's said. Two of the Central Valley's top water-intensive crops were alfalfa and cotton in 2006, according to the California Dept. of Food and Agriculture.



Edited by
Jeffrey St. Clair
and Joshua Frank

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Meanwhile, gas prices are rising, home prices are falling and the job market is weakening. As these squeezes tighten down on its residential and nonresidential customers, Roseville is using cash incentives such as rebates. One example of this is a rebate for consumers to buy home appliances that use less water.

Speaking of prices and resources, Roseville began requiring water meters for new residential construction in 1992. In mid-2001 the city established a goal of 15,000 water meters and has installed 9,000 to-date, said Sean Bigley, administrative analyst for the city.

Downstream from Roseville is the city of Sacramento. Its charter prohibits residential water meters. That's a factor in the misuse of water by residents of the city, which has legal rights to water from the American River, Stork said.

Back in Roseville, however, its meters are not a cure-all for its residents' use of water. Apparently, what the economists call the price signal has limits with respect to water use.

At the same time there is the matter of water-use governance. Roseville has an elected city council with a public utilities commission that takes input from residents. Citizens and policymakers live in the same community. Profits are not the sole factor in policy-making.

In contrast, there are privately-owned water companies such as the Fruitridge Vista and Golden State Water companies in Sacramento County. The state Public Utilities Commission, based in San Francisco, regulates these firms, not local customers who vote. This fact makes PUC water governance quite different from that of a public utility such as Roseville, said Stork.

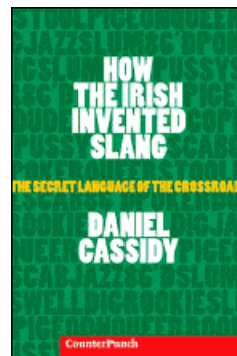
"It's hard to imagine a more public resource than water," said Dave Evans, chair of the geology department at CSU Sacramento.

On May 1 the state Dept. of Water Resources released its last snow survey of 2008. The data showed 67 percent of snow water content of normal for the date, throughout the state. This data might change California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's call in Feb. to cut per person water use 20 percent by 2020.

Against this backdrop, Roseville residents received letters in late May detailing the city's voluntary water conservation measures. It is unclear how they will work there and in turn shape future water-use policy for the Sacramento region and California. Much is at stake.

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ssandronsky@yahoo.com.

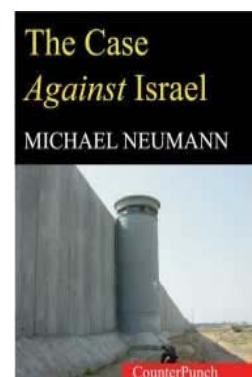
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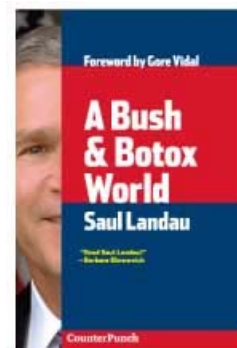
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