

Kathleene Parker (continued)

great concern in 1950 when fewer than 15 million people lived in the Southwest, but a serious problem today as the population stands at 60 million on its way to a projected—land-development interests would argue a “hoped-for”—doubling late century. Stream-gage readings have averaged only 14.2 million acre feet per year since 1950, despite it being the dampest period in discernible history.

The Colorado could well average only about 13.5 million acre-feet a year, a stark reality become clearer in the mid-1990s as drier norms returned and reservoir levels plummeted—even as the region’s already booming population really began to explode, part of national demographics linked to births (40 percent of growth) and immigration (60 percent), with the high birth-rate among first-generation immigrants also part of the “birth” number. Key is that, while few things influence outcomes more than our sheer numbers, “leaders” are continuing policies influencing demographics—such as the highest immigration in our nation’s history by a factor of five, higher even than during the Frontier Era “Great Wave”—with no acknowledgement or discussion of the implications to problems like the water shortfalls in the now highly populated Southwest.

Scientific and other voices warn that that shortfall is dangerous, even if global warming is not taken into account, since population increases make the entire water system more “brittle” and likely to respond more quickly and more negatively to drought. At the least, water shortfalls will increase political instability. Nevada recently threatened, for example, to break the very core of all water management in the Southwest, the Colorado River Compact, based on shortfalls linked to its mushrooming population and drought and what it saw as an unwill-

But then, grim reality dawned as it was discovered the allocation was based on measurements on the river during the wettest period in 400 years. It was clear that 1.3 million acre feet more water was apportioned than would exist most years.

ingness of other interests to hear its concerns.

The Scripps Institute of Oceanography has warned—based on a study that bent over backwards to err on the side of caution—that Lake Mead, the largest reservoir in the nation, by the 2020s could run dry. Others have raised concerns about the second largest reservoir, Lake Powell, with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation conceding, partly due to water-management changes implemented to try to ameliorate the crisis on the Colorado, that Lake Powell will likely never reach the full-line again.

Critical is that these massive reservoirs are the water core upon which the economy and civilization of the Southwest is built.

Other agencies—the National Academy of Sciences, the Pacific Institute, the University of Colorado’s Western Water Assessment—have similarly raised concerns. A National Academy’s statement, after a 2007 study, said, “It became clear that a broad understanding of the Colorado River management issues is not possible unless both water supply and water demand issues are adequately studied. Our report presents population growth data for much of the western

United States that is served by Colorado River water. The cities in the region are collectively the fastest growing in the nation. Of further concern is that growth seems to be occurring with little regard to long-term availability of future water supplies. (Emphasis added.)

Yet, virtually every approach by “leaders” to the crisis—those who even acknowledge it—is only on the “supply side,” or how to find more water, stretch available supplies, or to turn to “techno fixes,” like de-salting, that will only marginally increase supplies or are energy intensive at a time when energy is also an increasing problem, as defined in a recent Sandia National Laboratory study.

Meanwhile, they focus exclusively, to total preoccupation, on attracting more growth to our already fast-growing region—this as they serve “the few,” powerful



economic forces dependent upon continued high population growth, especially developers.

That type of “tyranny of the few over the many” is particularly dangerous if it means a potentially dangerous water crisis is not addressed in a common-sense, all-inclusive—demand side and supply side—way, or if national policies affecting growth are never discussed or their demographic implications considered.

(Parker, who lives near Albuquerque, is a fifth-generation native of the American Southwest, and has worked as a journalist covering Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Jemez Mountain region for the Santa Fe New Mexican. She has also worked and written about water issues, forestry issues and population, regionally and nationally.)

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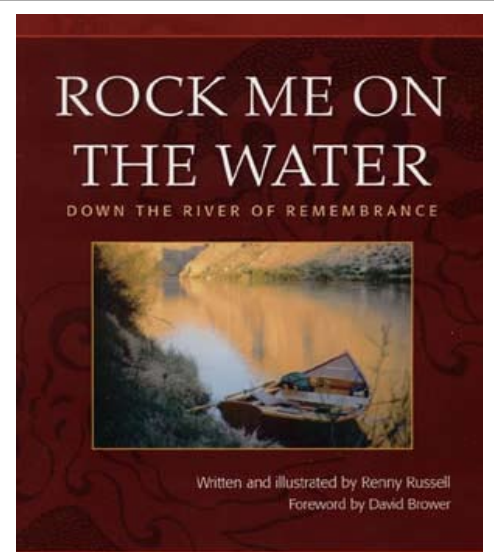
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