



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

WATER POLICY: PERSPECTIVES, ISSUES, AND POLICY OPTIONS

*Lynn A. Greenwalt
National Wildlife Federation*

Viewed from the rolling hills of Virginia, a part of the nation seemingly without water problems, the question of water policy seems remote and without basis for concern. Here, water is evidently abundant. The streams flow and there is a verdance that would deny any possibility of the water problems associated with a lack of quantity or a question of quality.

Even here, however, there are water problems. The quality of water, both surface and ground, is sometimes of major concern: only a hundred or so miles away from this tranquil place, the James River was recently so polluted by a toxic substance dumped in it that the Governor of Virginia was forced to close fishing and curtail other uses of the water. Even closer by, where the Potomac River surges toward the Chesapeake Bay, there are alternate problems of water shortage and devastating floods. Only in recent years has the Potomac been made clean enough to support swimming and, until recently, fish populations were depressed to the point where an afternoon's angling was a fruitless endeavor.

Even in Virginia water has been fought over, litigated about, and countless hours of political debate invested in attempting to formulate plans for the rational sharing of this resource. Water policy, often discussed and diligently sought after, has yet to be applied in any coherent way even here, where problems are present, but relatively simple.

To put it bluntly, there is no national water policy in the United States. There are locally-developed schemes which, when applied, can be said to represent policy, but nothing that can be so distinguished for the country as a whole.

Water in the United States has been appropriated — most often by means of complex and often confusing laws; it has been exploited — most frequently on the basis of locally-inspired plans for water development projects having little more than regional importance; and it has been frequently degraded — almost literally “used to death” on lands from which it carries away silt and chemicals, or as ready so-

lutions for sewage and waste disposal problems, or as the recipient of toxicants of all kinds. These uses have been varied, extensive, and invariably the products of *ad hoc* planning with little thought given to the consequences of the actions taken.

Some patterns have emerged from the accumulated history of water use in this country. This history of use ranges across the better part of a century, though some major water development projects date back much further than that.

One dimension of this history has been the reclamation of arid lands in the west, based upon the relocation of water, the storage of immense quantities of it, and the use of imaginative and complex water systems for its subsequent distribution.

Another facet of water use is the other side of the water development coin: flood control, necessitated by increasing urban development, a good part of which has taken place within flood plains. Other flood control projects have been inspired in a “domino effect” way, in which land drainage upstream has resulted in the need to control floods downstream, and the overall effort to get as much water off the land as rapidly as possible has spawned yet another tier of major flood control measures, designed to accommodate the accumulated consequences of the upstream works.

There is a vast supply of water in the United States, but it is poorly distributed, locally over-exploited, and subject to serious degradation of its quality.

Programs and projects are developed in ways that ignore — or even deny — the connections that bring them all together. These seemingly isolated public programs have been designed fundamentally to increase agricultural production, improve water supplies for municipal and industrial users, and to limit the impacts of floods. The results have been ● a 60-million-acre irrigated cropland economy, ● municipal and industrial growth that as often as not displaces prime farmland and increases the need for flood protection, and ● the development of a taxpayer-supported political edifice referred to as “pork barrel” largesse. Of course, these plans are almost invariably constructed so as to be capable of paying for themselves, through the inclusion of power-generating systems where this is feasible, or by means of convoluted provisions for water-user fees, land taxes, and other devices. Few, if any, of these plans have ever been carried through to the extent that any one of them has been paid for — except by the taxpayer, who must provide the “front” money and who usually gets to carry that burden into the distant and possibly unattainable future.

Major water development projects continue to be spawned, though without any real semblance of planning or coordination that would bespeak a national policy on the subject. For more than a decade the Congress has said it favors the development of a national water policy

based upon a series of reforms. There has been almost universal agreement that there should be a reformation of the way water projects are developed, but virtually no agreement as to what these reforms should be. (As an example of the disjointed way water projects are proposed, supported, and funded, the 98th Congress ended with a passage of a Continuing Resolution designed to provide funding for the operation of the government until more specific single appropriations measures could be passed. Water projects that had been bandied about in Congress for years were brought forth and rolled into a Continuing Resolution — often without any previous hearings, let alone formal projection authorization — so that finally more than 30 such projects, with a price tag estimated to be as much as \$18 billion, had been appended to the Continuing Resolution legislation, high-priced and high-prized decorations on a bill which itself could not readily be denied. Only after real threat of a veto did these and other similar appurtenances get stripped from the funding legislation and a Continuing Resolution passed.)

I speak as a conservationist and an official of a group deeply concerned about water policy and its implications. We of the National Wildlife Federation are concerned primarily with fish, wildlife, and recreational values of the lands and waters of this country. We recognize, as do an increasing number of people, that the well-being of fish and wildlife and other living resources depends on the fundamentals of air, water, and land, used wisely and with an understanding of the consequences of the uses we make of these basic elements of the environment.

We care about consequences. We are not opposed to the development of our natural resources, or the wise and rational exploitation of those resources. We *are* opposed to uses that do not recognize the probable consequences of those uses. We want exponents of water projects to understand that their plans will have an effect upon a complex variety, and often a large number, of other resources — and to be prepared to ameliorate those effects insofar as is possible. A good water policy for this country will take into account the need to recognize and accommodate those consequences. That has not happened yet, but more and more people — in and out of Congress and the state legislatures — are thinking about it. We believe that one day, maybe even soon, there will be honest and earnest efforts made to effect water policy reform and the construction of a wide-ranging water policy that can serve all interests with equal attention to consequences.

Some of the basic water program reforms recommended by the National Wildlife Federation — and other conservation groups — include:

- Appropriate pricing of water delivered to the user. The price for water should be approximately what it costs to get there. Water is not cheap, especially not when it has been transported, stored, and delivered to the land in a timely fashion and free of

pollution. A proper price, arrived at by straightforward determinations of actual cost, including the continued maintenance of the delivery works involved, will help assure that only cost-effective projects will be advanced, and the water used only in ways that are truly profitable.

- There should be substantial “up front” financing of projects by the sponsors of those projects. Locally-generated funding will make sure that sponsors are serious about the merits of their plans, and that only projects truly worthwhile are constructed. The “free-lunch” concepts heretofore in vogue have produced far too many projects that are of questionable merit and which serve only to compound many other problems, including crop surpluses and related costs to the public.

- There should be a commitment to plan in accordance with reasonable planning and evaluation policies that will sift out projects that cannot stand on their own merits. (Such a planning process, referred to as the Principles and Standards for Water Project Evaluation, was developed a few years ago and was proving to be relatively successful, but many water project advocates found these guidelines impeded their version of progress and summarily discarded them within the past few years.)

- There must be far greater opportunity for public participation in the processes that lead to decisions about the allocation and use of water and to the decisions about water projects themselves. These too often are regarded as merely local or regional concerns even though taxpayers nationwide are expected to pay for them, at least at the outset. Ample public participation, as provided for in the Principles and Standards and in the process of developing Environmental Impact Statements, will shed the bright light of understanding on many a project which cannot survive such illumination.

- There must be appropriate recognition of values regarding fish and wildlife and their habitats that are invariably affected as a result of water project development. Experience has demonstrated that in most cases it is possible to develop rational water projects while retaining most environmental values, providing project advocates are willing to embody in their plans the kinds of modifications and project components that will offset the values lost or displaced. These generally cost money and must be considered as a factor in the cost/benefit evaluations of all such project proposals.

- There must be a recognition and ultimate resolution of the fundamental conflicts that arise from most water development projects. Conflicts may include the consequences of providing “cheap” water which, in turn, encourages excessive crop production and leads to passage of seemingly unrelated commodity price

supports and set-aside programs. These then set the stage for such counter productive activities as large-scale “sodbusting” on fragile marginal lands in the West. Other consequences may include the effects of minerals leached from irrigated land into sumps and water supplies, providing an array of even more complex problems stemming from salinization, the poisoning of water supplies and habitats for wildlife, and the added costs derived from the need to correct these too-often ignored complications.

It should be reemphasized that few conservationists advocate “no-growth” solutions to these basic problems. We recognize that “no-growth” is an option that is inconsistent with the reality of a growing human population and the demands it makes upon the nation’s natural resources — of which water is the most critical. We seek the recognition of the consequences of actions that are proposed, and we encourage decisions that reflect the reality of those consequences.

We are as aware as anyone that water is a precious commodity, one that exists in abundance, but in nature is not distributed advantageously. We know that water projects are vital to the economic well-being of the country. At the same time we know that the world is made up of a complex aggregation of factors that are linked together, and that there cannot be a disconnecting of those links without running grave risks as a result.

We know, too, that those risks involve not only the fish and wildlife and related resources of the country, but the ultimate well-being of the human species as well. Water that is not wisely used is worthless; water that is used to purposes that are themselves likely to represent a long-term detriment to the economy is worse than worthless; water that has been thoughtlessly polluted or allowed to erode the surface of the earth, or which has been allowed to become a waste disposal system, is more than useless, it is in fact a hazard. We know these things and we seek general understanding and resultant action based upon these facts to the end that a useful and rational national water policy is developed and adhered to.

To repeat, we are concerned about consequences. It is time all of us recognize the consequences of our actions as they relate to the use of water in this country. We must keep consequences in mind, always, or there will only be an increase in the chaotic state of water policy in our country — with incalculable effect upon the future of the nation and its citizens.