

Arizonans know future they want for 'Arid-zona'



In this July 20, 2014, file photo, a bathtub ring of light minerals shows the high water line near Hoover Dam on Lake Mead at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Nevada. (AP Photo/John Locher,File)

Take a look at Lake Mead, sad and shriveled where once it was brimming. Built in 1935 to impound more water than any reservoir in America, it now sits at just 36% of capacity and continues its inexorable long-term decline.

The parched reservoir gives us a preview of the future awaiting Arizonans, who face dire water shortages in the coming decades — unless state and national leaders abandon their growth-at-all-costs mentality and reverse the policies that are set to push Arizona's population to the ecological brink.

The Southwest's warming and drying climate has shrunk the Colorado River's flow by about a fifth of its volume over the past century. The federal government's most recent National Climate Assessment, a 1,500-page behemoth, warns that this could become the water-scarce norm as the climate heats up and snow-packs in the Rocky Mountains melt away.

The Assessment's grim forecast is that increases in temperature would also contribute to "aridification (a potentially permanent change to a drier environment) in much of the Southwest through increased evapotranspiration, lower soil moisture, reduced snow cover, earlier and slower snowmelt, and changes in the timing and efficiency of snowmelt and runoff."

These changes, it adds, would "increase the duration and severity of droughts and generate an overall drier regional climate." Arizona, not especially verdant at the best of times, will almost certainly become Arid-zona.

Next year, the state's farmers and tribes are bracing for cuts in their water supply that could reach half a million acre-feet, about a fifth of the state's allotment under the Colorado River Compact and subsequent agreements with other states in the basin.



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The long-term outlook is daunting for the Colorado River, Lake Mead, and Arizonans, whose state is caught in an epic bind of the kind foreseen in "Cadillac Desert" (1986), Mark Reisner's classic book on the American West and its disappearing water. They are caught in a clash between thirsty, energy-intensive development, on the one side, and bleak hydrologic and climatic realities on the other.

The "growth" camp foresees a future of technological innovation and adaptation, heralding an era of sustainable abundance — in essence, progress in perpetuity. Our ingenuity will make the barren desert bloom — with crops, solar panels, subdivisions, and more and more people.

The opposing vision — "small is beautiful" — prophesies an austere future constrained by scarcity, in which we "live within limits." Alternative energy guru Amory Lovins called this "elegant frugality." If we're not careful, the desert won't bloom, it'll engulf us, smother our conceits in sand. Yet the cheerleaders of unfettered growth — including virtually all of Arizona's politicians, Democrat and Republican — are unfazed. They categorically reject that dwindling water and dying aquifers should ever impose a limit to growth. Some of them seem to repose blind faith in the desalination of ocean water as our back-stop panacea.

But what do Arizonans themselves think about water resources and growth? We got an idea in a 2020 survey of 1,000 likely Arizona Voters, commissioned for a study on urban sprawl in Arizona that I co-authored.

When asked whether water should be diverted from irrigated cropland to accommodate additional population growth in Arizona's cities, only 19% answered yes, compared to 55% who said no. In terms of conservation, 47% believed it was more important for Arizona's remaining surface water to continue to support aquatic and wildlife habitat compared to the 39% who thought it should be diverted to farms and growing cities.

When asked how to provide sufficient water to accommodate the three million additional Arizonans that state demographers project by 2050, 44% said "it is better not to add another 3 million residents," compared to 10% who favored diverting water from the state's remaining surface water and aquifers, 7% who favored diverting water from irrigated agriculture, and 31% who wanted

construction of desalination facilities and pipelines across Mexico and California.

Just how large a human footprint can the Southwest accommodate, and for how long? Rank-and-file Arizonans seem to have a better grasp of ecological and economic realities than their leaders. We should look to them for answers, and not to our reality-blind politicians.

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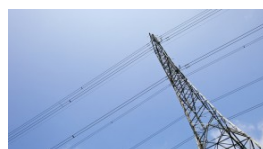
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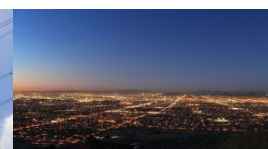
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