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Associated Press

Phil Norton of the Klamath Basin National Wildlife Refuge in Tulelake, Calif., walks across mud flats created when the Interior Department cut off irrigation water to 1,400 farms in April.

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Low water levels raise tension

U.S. struggles over sharing, managing dwindling resource

By Bill Lambrecht / St. Louis Post-Dispatch

ST. LOUIS -- In southern Oregon, 5,000 protesters rallied around a massive empty bucket, a symbol of the water crisis that has engulfed the region.

In Missouri, a coalition of farmers, barge interests and business groups threatened a suit to block a government proposal to alter the flow of the Missouri River.

Meanwhile, negotiators from Georgia, Florida and Alabama worked against a deadline to craft a landmark water-sharing agreement. Failure could mean that a judge will divvy up the water from rivers that have been depleted by urban sprawl.



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The actions tell a story of heightened tensions over water and new attempts, sometimes rancorous, to share an increasingly precious resource.

Bill Oetting speaks at a protest in Klamath Falls, Ore., where the lack of water for farming has become an emotional issue.

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Conflicts over scarcity

"There are many concerns and even jealousy. Everybody worries that somebody's going to steal their water," said Robert M. Hirsch, the government's chief water scientist.

Hirsch is associate director of the U.S. Geological Survey, the Interior Department agency that monitors the quantity and the quality of the nation's water. He keeps tabs on the conflicts over water scarcity that are erupting around the country.

"The level of conflict over water that we usually associate with the West is now occurring around the country," he said.

In parts of the country, people are rapidly depleting ground water that has been around since the Ice Age, Hirsch said. Pumping from aquifers, he said, "is no different than gold mining or coal mining. But people are beginning to ask whether we should continue to do that, or might it be better to save some of that water for the future."

Around the world, water is growing scarcer. The International Water Management Institute predicted in August that by 2025, nearly one-third of the world's people will live in regions that face severe water scarcity.

Farms vs. wildlife

Few Americans have experienced such scarcity. But concerns have increased as global temperatures have risen in recent years. In nearly every trouble spot, Hirsch sees competition from the same forces -- farmers, cities and conservationists.

Farmers want river water for irrigation, which has enabled them to turn parched acreage in the West and High Plains into productive land.

Cities and towns need the water for people to drink and factories to operate. In many places, those needs are accelerating because of population growth.

Meanwhile, conservationists increasingly demand that the water stay in rivers to provide more natural conditions for wildlife. Their case has been strengthened by the Endangered Species Act, which has turned the Fish and Wildlife Service into a police agency dedicated to the survival of fish and birds.

Underlying the new conflicts, according to Hirsch, are values that are changing as Americans look differently than they once did at their rivers.

That's the case along the Missouri River, he says. Dam operations begun more than 50 years ago were designed to reduce flooding and enable barges to ferry grain on the lower stretch of the river. Back then, few people understood that deepening and narrowing the river would destroy its backwaters and therefore the breeding ground for fish and birds.

But in recent years, the old ways of river management have been attacked relentlessly by conservationists and the Fish and Wildlife

Service. And soon the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will decide whether to alter the river's flow to create favorable surroundings for the pallid sturgeon and two species of birds. Missouri has fought the flow changes successfully so far.

Worries about the future of the Great Lakes have mounted as the water levels have dropped. In three years, the levels have declined about 3 feet -- the most precipitous drop in more than a generation.

The decline triggered an initiative this summer by governors in states bordering the Great Lakes to cut back on the diversion of water. The Great Lakes Governors Council is especially concerned about proposals to transport water to other regions of the country and even abroad.

Gerald E. Galloway, who heads the International Joint Commission -- a U.S.-Canadian agency that resolves disputes over water shared between the two countries -- believes large-scale diversions might not be an immediate threat because of the cost.

Nonetheless, he feels that attention to the Great Lakes is merited. "People are realizing that water is very precious and that we need to be able to deal with it in a constructive and reasoned way."

Klamath Falls a rallying cry

No water problem in the nation has generated more emotion than the scarcity at Klamath Falls, Ore., near the California border.

Since the Interior Department shut off irrigation water to 1,400 farms in April to protect fish, Klamath Falls has become a rallying point for critics of the Endangered Species Act. But the decisions to be made are more complex than preserving the endangered suckerfish and making sure that the Klamath Indian tribe has enough coho salmon.

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