

It's not just California's drought, it's America's

By David Horsey

After a week on horseback helping my rancher friends with their annual cattle roundup, I boarded Amtrak's Empire Builder in Havre, Mont., on Sunday and looked forward to resting my sore muscles for the 18 hours it would take to reach the coast. As I settled into my sleeping compartment, the friendly porter handed me a complimentary bottle of water.

It did not take long to notice where that water had come from: California.



David Horsey / Los Angeles Times

That's one of the curiosities of the current drought in the state. While Gov. Jerry Brown is pushing municipalities to cut back on water use by 25%, Nestle is still drawing water out of the ground and shipping it off to the rest of the country. That makes about as much sense as growing water-thirsty crops, such as almonds, in the arid central part of the Golden State -- which, of course, continues season after dry season.

As the world is observing, the biggest state in the Union has got a water problem. People across the country and around the world are talking about "the California drought." But, as author Cynthia Barnett confirms in a smart [opinion piece](#) in the Los Angeles Times, the water crisis is not just a problem for Californians, it is a problem for all Americans.

Start with wildfires. State and federal officials are warning that dry forests throughout the several states of the Great Basin are highly likely to burst into flames in the coming months, at great cost and tremendous strain on firefighting capabilities.

Then there's food. It's really the entire West that is dry and, though some ranchers, like my friends up on the High Line in Montana, may be able to cope with less water because they are far enough north to avoid the worst of the drought, the cattle industry further south could be in trouble. So too farmers, from California to Oklahoma.

According to Barnett, reductions in cattle herds in the West are being compensated for by bigger herds in places such as Indiana, New York and other Eastern states. Future cuts in agricultural production in California could be offset by increased production in the South. The problem with shifting cows and crops from the West to the East and South, though, is that water is not an endless resource in those areas either.

The whole country needs to come to grips with the way we use water. Climate change is going to force the issue and the sooner we all confront the realities and all become good conservationists, the better off we will be. From ranchers and farmers to folks who have a swimming pool in their backyard and the many more who have a big, green lawn out in front, life is going to be very different than it has been.

Pretending water use is just California's problem will not wash that hard truth away.

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