

# Stephen Grace: How water scarcity shaped America

By Stephen Grace

Water, when scarce, has split the nation into warring factions. But it has also united fractured regions. Water can both release the demons of war and stir the better angels of our nature.

We hear so much about California and its drought. But consider the whole West — and the Continental Divide, also known as the Great Divide. This spine of the continent splits North America — and the state of Colorado, where I live — into hydrological halves.

The snowy West Slope of the Great Divide boasts abundant rivers that flow to the Pacific Ocean. The East Slope, which drains to the Atlantic, is decidedly drier but is home to a thirsty agricultural sector and Front Range cities (including Denver and Colorado Springs). To address this imbalance, Colorado diverts water from the West Slope of the Great Divide to the East Slope by means of a Rube Goldberg assemblage of dikes, dams, and pipes. The economic and ecological consequences of this water transfer from one side of the divide to the other have provoked disputes throughout the state's history.

Droughts and disconnects between water sources and water needs are by no means exclusive to the western United States. In the 1980s, severe drought triggered a water dispute between Georgia, Alabama, and Florida when drought-depleted rivers couldn't satisfy competing needs for agricultural production, municipal use, hydroelectric generation, and environmental health. Florida also faces water wars within its borders. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, Florida is one of 14 states at high risk of water shortages by mid-century. The Sunshine State is blessed with an abundance of freshwater in its rural north, but cities desperate for more supply crowd the south.

Along with diverting rivers, pumping water from beneath the ground has supported the growth of cities in many parts of the country. It has also revolutionized agriculture, notably on the High Plains. This rain-scarce region was transformed into one of the world's most bountiful breadbaskets by pumping from the Ogallala Aquifer, which stretches from Texas to South Dakota. The Ogallala, which accumulated over millennia as melting Ice Age glaciers soaked into the ground, is now being spent far faster than rain can replenish it. This liquid inheritance is in danger of running dry—and creating skirmishes both within states and across state borders.

Conflict, of course, commands attention. Some of the West's most iconic stories—from the novel "The Virginian" to the movie "Shane" to the Broadway musical "Oklahoma!"—center on conflicts over scarce water. But as I learned while researching The Great Divide, a forthcoming film and book about Colorado's water issues, that's not the whole story. What is less apparent, but arguably more significant, is that water scarcity has spurred far-reaching compromises throughout history.

The 1922 Colorado River Compact united seven western states in a far-reaching agreement that negated the need for courtroom brawls. Some argue now that the Colorado River Compact should be replaced with a new interstate agreement that reflects the realities of the 21st-century American West. Regardless, over nine decades later, that compact continues to balance water use between states. This is not as exciting a story as the narrative of "Chinatown," the film classic about ruthless L.A. power brokers robbing a river from a valley. But as California's epic drought exposes stark divides between north and south, between cities and agriculture, the proven ability of water agreements to bond fractured regions must not be forgotten.

In 2013, the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement created a framework for resolving disputes over the use of West Slope rivers by Denver Water, which supplies 1.3 million people in Denver and its suburbs. Former adversaries will work together to improve the health of the watershed while allowing Denver Water to increase the amount of its

diversions across the Great Divide during periods of high flow.

Water compromises are not the stuff of scintillating drama. But as we face a future of cities surging with growth in some of the continent's driest regions, cooperation, not conflict, will be the best way to bridge our nation's many water divides.

Stephen Grace is the author of *The Great Divide*, a companion book to "The Great Divide" film by Havey Productions, which will be published in August. He wrote this for Thinking L.A., a partnership of UCLA and [Zócalo Public Square](#).