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HOW TO CREATE A WATER CRISIS

By Frank Welsh.

Boulder: Johnson Books. 1985. Pp. 238. \$16.95

Are major water importation schemes such as the Central Arizona Project (CAP) cost-effective solutions to critical real world water problems, or are they symptoms of a fundamental shortcoming in the way America addresses water resources issues? That is the principal focus of this controversial discussion of water problems, policies, and projects in Arizona.

The book represents an impassioned attempt to set the record straight regarding Arizona's water needs. It exposes what the author believes are the many myths about water which must be exploded so that the real water crisis can be identified and confronted. The dominant tone is that of a crusader battling for simple common sense approaches in the intricate and convoluted arena of water rights and water wrongs. Welsh is certain that ample water exists in the Gila-Salt river systems and in underground storage to satisfy the urban growth needs of metropolitan Phoenix for centuries to come. If shortages do arise, they will more likely result from outdated institutional arrangements for allocating water coupled with inefficiencies in agricultural practices rather than from any physical shortage of water. The CAP represents only the latest misguided attempt to deal with these mythical water deficits, an expensive and unnecessary endeavor promoted by a self-serving bureaucracy and made possible by an irresponsible system of political decisionmaking. Better and cheaper alternatives exist, such as groundwater mining or water marketing, but they fail to gain support because they threaten vested interests. Concerned citizens can fight the entrenched bureaucrats in an attempt to achieve rational, cost-effective approaches to water distribution, storage, and allocation, as they did in the protracted struggle over Orme Dam, but victory will not come easily.

The text consists largely of example upon example of what the author believes to be misguided policies for dealing with Arizona water problems, accompanied by numerous, forceful arguments in favor of alternative approaches. One of the strengths of the book is the breadth of its perspective when attempting to place the CAP question within a broader context of national and statewide water management practices. Unfortunately, the potential effectiveness of this work is undermined by too many instances of superficial analysis and expressions of support for simplistic solutions. Here are a few examples. When it is suggested that

pre-CAP water resources in Arizona could support as many as twenty to twenty-five million persons, there is no attempt even to acknowledge the potential for severe economic disruption and political conflict that might accompany the necessary reallocation of water rights. When discussing conservation, the view that major savings are reasonably easy to achieve is endorsed without question, while an artificial distinction between "human beings" that can survive on less than one gallon of water a day and "modern conveniences" that consume much larger quantities of water is presented as if it were somehow relevant to the pursuit of conservation in a modern industrial society. When dealing with water rate issues, the paradox of lower water rates in the arid West is subject to ridicule, but there is no attempt to discuss the cost basis of water rates that has led to this apparent anomaly. A proposal for massive relocation of agriculture from central Arizona to the Colorado River Valley attracts the author's attention in part because there would be virtually no cost to the taxpayer, a position that disregards the potentially adverse fiscal impacts resulting from the economic and social disruption accompanying such a move. And the sale of Arizona water rights to California is proposed as a "market place solution," an approach which ignores the fact that much of the value of the water stems from the existence of government subsidized water storage facilities. These examples and others like them weaken the overall thesis by creating an impression that the author has been indiscriminate in his search for evidence to support his main points.

In the preface and again in the concluding chapter the author pays homage to a vision of "the American way" where minimal governmental interference, tax reductions, and market place solutions are the ideals which ought to guide policy choices. Adherence to these principles should result in more efficient utilization of water resources than is likely to occur when entrenched bureaucracies are allowed to control the agenda. Whether these values represent a sufficient description of "the American way" is an issue that lies beyond the scope of this review. But serious questions can be raised about the degree of similarity between the society described in the book and that which actually exists in America today. When dealing with specific water issues, the author's vision suffers from a tendency to denigrate political inefficiencies and incongruities born of pluralism and legitimate conflicting interests, while favoring, instead, narrowly rational, simple or obvious solutions that are insensitive to political process and human diversity. This naive vision may appeal to popular sentiments in the mid-1980s, but it is unlikely to provide an adequate long-term framework for dealing with the complex interrelationship of economics, politics, and geography that has long characterized resource use issues in democratic America.

Some of the dissatisfaction raised here may stem from this reviewer's

preference for a less obviously biased treatment of the CAP controversy. Too often, the author seems more concerned with piling up evidence that makes the CAP and its supporters appear foolish and misguided than with attempting any in-depth analysis of the issues and alternative solutions. The lack of balance is especially bothersome, since the author's frequent claims of scientific justification and support for his main arguments are not accompanied by a careful weighing of the evidence, both pro and con, that marks legitimate scientific inquiry. Doubts may also be raised about the overall effectiveness of this book even if it is judged as a position paper on the dangers and costs of environmental meddling on the part of an overly intrusive legislative process and a single-minded bureaucracy. The language and arguments are so one-sided that they run the risk of appealing only to those who already agree with the author's viewpoint. Less committed readers are likely to question the author's objectivity and, by extension, his facts, when there is so much evidence of bias and lack of respect for opposing viewpoints in the tone and content of the narrative. Can the issues really be as simple and clear-cut as the author suggests? Can the administrative and political process really be blind to such apparent truths or is it the author who is blinded by his dedication to a cause? At what point does an unbalanced and at times superficial treatment do more harm than good by alienating those who are legitimately seeking information on an issue?

It is particularly disappointing that *How to Create a Water Crisis* is not a more persuasive book since its fundamental criticisms are not necessarily misdirected. Agriculture has come under increasing scrutiny throughout the Southwest because of the dubious cost effectiveness of its water use practices. The power of vested water interests both inside and outside of government has certainly been recognized at least as far back as the ill-fated Carter administration attempts at meaningful reform of federal water policy. And the economic viability of the CAP has been the subject of heated debate, as Welsh correctly points out, for the past twenty years. Books such as this one serve a valuable purpose when they draw attention to issues involving major public expenditures, potentially serious environmental disruption, and the future quality of life. But it can also be argued that the very importance of these issues requires the highest standards of research and in-depth argument so that opinions can be formed based on reliable information. Unfortunately, the present book falls substantially short of meeting this last objective.

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