

## **July 31, 2013. WTE Editor's Headline: "Fate of a Dehydrated Economy"**

Is the right to water a human right? Americans would say, our Founders no more guaranteed such a right than they did a right to land or food. Yet recent global water movements and sustainability groups hold that governments must protect its residents' water against big business. James Workman in "Heart of Dryness" documents how Wall Street deems water scarcity "one of the world's great business opportunities." In five years, global bottled-water revenues doubled to \$15 billion, and private water management was projected to hit \$1 trillion by 2015.

Municipalities caught with aging sewage and water pipes may be tempted to hand over the hassles to private enterprise. The problem: Private businesses, particularly international mega-corporations, focus on profit rather than customer service. In 2003, the city council of Stockton, Calif., awarded a \$600-million water-privatization contract to foreign-based OMI-Thames. In 2007, Stockton residents succeeded in overthrowing the arrangement.

Stockton has its precedent. Soon after the Declaration of Independence, this country's first-ever water privatization emerged as a for-profit business. In 1799, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton and Vice President Aaron Burr got together to found the Manhattan Water Company. They negotiated an exclusive government contract, promising to tap into then-pristine River Bronx for delivery of quality water. Instead, they piped in Manhattan's own brackish water—except to the super rich, who paid whatever price the company set. Then, instead of re-investing their profits in the water venture, Burr leveraged the company's equity and capital to found the bank that later became Chase Manhattan, rival to Hamilton's Bank of New York. It took three decades of mismanagement and a cholera outbreak before enraged New Yorkers managed to rescind the scheme. The former partners turned against each other in a duel that left Hamilton mortally wounded.

In 2004, an award-winning CBS series documented the disaster of today's water-grabbing. Soon after, a book examined the menace in Bolivia, India, and in the U.S. "Thirst: Fighting the Corporate Theft of Our Water," alerted readers to corporate takeovers of dwindling global water supplies.

In the United States, fifty-seven rivers have shrunk to record lows. The Pacific-bound Colorado and the Atlantic-bound Rio Grande are bone-dry by the time they reach their respective destinations—and have been for years. Meanwhile, "Fryeburg, Maine, gasps as a foreign bottled-water conglomerate removes water in 92 tankers per day." Within a few years, thirty-six dry states may have "no place else to go."

Contrary to basic economics, water-use has become more profligate as water is growing scarce. Global water consumption has doubled every twenty years, alarming even Wall Street bankers. Two out of every five global industries acknowledge that the impact of water shortages on their businesses would be "severe to catastrophic," writes Workman from research published in *The Economist*; fewer than 17 percent say they are prepared

for the eventuality. Even experienced water managers admit to lacking any solutions and, looking ahead, predict, humanity's future "may resemble an Armageddon."

The worst guzzlers are the extractive industries. Diamond extraction is as thirsty as fracking for fossil fuels. "All told, the world's extractive and processing industries annually suck out 200 trillion gallons from the earth's aquifers and streams." The mining industry that arose from California's gold rush "destroyed twelve thousand miles of American rivers and 180,000 acres of lakes and reservoirs," notably in Nevada, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. Today's Silicon Valley seems same song second verse: "California's information technology firms require 3,400 gallons per microchip."

What of desalination plants? They are shockingly energy-intensive, having to rely on power plants that today use up "forty percent of existing freshwater supplies."

"Water is the new oil," assert U.S. security analysts. Actually, it's a lot worse, Workman concludes: energy alternatives exist for petroleum, but water has no substitute. The fate of a dehydrated economy is collapse: "After three thirsty days you secured clean freshwater or you died. Or you killed." Workman documents tribal water-wars in Kenya, Bolivia, and Iraq. He notes that Asia's drinking water kills tens of thousands from dissolved arsenic or heavy metals even as its farmers commit suicide when their wells run dry. "During the last violent century, the lack of clean water killed more people than all the wars combined. Now our military prepares for the onset of wars fought over water itself," he adds, citing a Pentagon report.

Then he returns to the above argument that water must not be treated as a private commodity to be brought, sold, and traded for profit. Water is a necessity; without it, the right to life and liberty is meaningless. "The Earth's fresh water belongs to the Earth and all its species," say movement adherents. In an issue of human rights versus corporate rights, "water is the most important issue of them all." The groups speak of "water barons" like Coke, Vivendi, Suez, and Bechtel, and they have drafted treaty initiatives to "Share and Protect the Global Water Commons."

But is water a human right? Workman pursues this question as he follows a minority group's lawsuit against its government, the Republic of Botswana, over this issue. The case is interesting because the Bushmen or San, also known as the First People, are homo sapiens' direct ancestors. They are reminders of who we once were, having remained in Africa as mega droughts forced the great exodus 150 centuries ago, to continue as gatherers and hunters.

You will learn more about the San of the Kalahari in my next column.