

# Preventing the water wars before they begin

When it comes to water, the warning signs are all around us. California's drought, hauntingly akin to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, presents a menu of unappetizing choices for the future.

The nursery industry is utterly dependent on water availability. If you want a silver lining to that, the lack of water would "solve" some of our most serious problems. We wouldn't need to worry about workers, transportation, or protection from pest and diseases, because there'd be no point.

As we enter the summer months, many states may find themselves in crisis. How we deal with it — and whether we put aside past policy differences with other users — will determine whether we survive or perish. And that's not a statement designed to rile an industry into action. It's the simple truth.

## Water nightmares becoming a reality

At a recent national nursery executive conference, John Farmer from the Irrigation Association put the water issue front and center. He explained that California, a behemoth among states, is not the only place affected by drought. Snowpack and water supply are now becoming critical throughout the West, impacting Texas, Oregon, Colorado and Arizona.

In October 2014, western nursery associations and nationally renowned experts examined the water crisis. As the climate changes, no corner of the country will escape dealing with this issue.

The root cause of the California crisis is not blindness to reservoirs and aquifers drying up, nor the cold reality of mandatory 25 percent cutbacks on water use. Rather, it is the "blame game" that is to blame. It's a systemic issue. Cities blame agriculture. Farmers blame environmentalists. Environmentalists use a court system to further complicate convoluted water systems and intractable water politics. Coupled with institutional conflict is the fact that California is suffering its worst drought in history. When precipitation falls as rain and not snow, it has serious consequences for farms, fish and families.

When things are functioning normally, winter snowpacks serve as a frozen reservoir. With the Sierra Nevada range at a mere 6 percent of normal snowpack, some 41 percent of California farms will encounter deep cuts to their water supplies this year. An estimated 620,000 acres will probably go fallow, causing economic losses of over \$5 billion. This sets the stage for a fierce battle between cities, farmers and conservation groups.

With the fertile climate of the Pacific Northwest, you would think Oregon would be different. Sadly, no. For the second consecutive year, Oregon's mountains have record-low snowpack — less than 10 percent of normal, according to the latest snow survey data from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

History has shown that climate conditions can create megadroughts lasting decades. That should get our attention.

## The last big environmental disaster

Timothy Egan's "The Worst Hard Time" chronicles the farm community around the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles in the

Great Depression era of the 1930s. Farm practices, rampant and migratory growth of cities, and a severe drought hit this region with fierce consequences. Ten-thousand-foot-high dust storms whipped across one of the richest ecosystems in the nation and left in its destructive path choking people and animals — 4.7 tons of dust per acre dropped in Kansas alone between March and April 1935. Fifty-mile-per-hour walls of dust blasted paint off buildings; crushed trees, and drifted into 50-foot dunes. The climate change invited tsunamis of grasshoppers, laying waste to anything that drought, hail and tornadoes had spared.

It was not until the dust storms crept their way into the U.S. Capitol that newly-elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt dispatched resources. During 1933–36, the federal government spent \$500 million (approximately \$8.5 billion in 2014 dollars)

to rotate crops, take some land out of production, and install irrigation ponds, holding tanks and plant material to hold the soil.

In 1933, FDR and Interior Secretary Harold Ickes established the Soil Erosion Service, led by agronomist Hugh Hammond Bennett. It was renamed the Soil Conservation Service in 1935. Now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), it is the only New Deal grassroots operation that survives to this day.

But these helpful actions in the Great Plains in the 1930s, as well as the money being thrown at the water problem in California today, still only masked a lack of forward thinking and foresight. In both cases, action waited until the situation was impossibly critical.

## A zero sum game hurts everyone

The Freshwater Trust, a conservation group that has a long history of habitat and river restoration, has stated that the planet has all the water it is ever going to have. The issue is how to harness those resources and get them where we need them.

Seems rational. Right? But in the murky depths of water policy and politics, a zero sum game is being pursued. Winners and losers. Good and evil.

Our association is not sitting on the sidelines, waiting to react when things get much worse. Instead, OAN is leading an effort to get municipalities, conservation and agricultural groups to the table at the state level and mutually solve problems now, not fight wars against each other later. We encourage national groups to follow our lead.

Yes, we can be the state "drought team." We can advocate for water storage, conservation and water quality funding. And our industry can be a leader in water reuse. We do, and we are, all of those things, but it won't be enough to save us. The measure of our success will be in how we prevent the water war and make sure that everyone can win. ©



**By Jeff Stone**  
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J Stone".