

How the GOP Ignores the West's Water Crisis, Drought, and Climate Change



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By Professor Warner Woodworth, Social Entrepreneur

Community May 23, 2021 · 9:26 PM MDT

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As an MBA professor who stressed ecology, the environment, and sustainability through his university teaching, I've observed too many politicians ignoring nature. Living in the Rocky Mountains much of my life, I'm often troubled by shortsighted government officials who appear not to care about natural resources. This piece is my attempt to clarify a May 21, 2021 report in Salt Lake City's *Deseret News* about growing water issues in the western U.S. Below, I'll cite selected sentences from the newspaper's actual article in quote marks, and then separately offer my own analysis in response by going through the issues. My rebuttals are to

various *Deseret News* (DN) quotes and officials' views, much of which can be correctly classified as misinformation.

To start with, California's Rep. Tom McClintock got at least one thing right in last week's webinar for GOP members of the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources. He admitted that many of his Republican colleagues "are a special kind of stupid," including, I think, most Utah officials from the governor on down. These characters incongruously tend to blame their own government for growing water shortages. I argue that it's not state policies or the weather, but climate change causing much of the crisis. We're now seeing what experts warned would be "the worst on record," yet the Utah legislature has merely hoped there would be more rain over past decades. So here are a few brief reactions to the growing predicament in the West.

DN: "The state's political leaders, however, are taking action." No, not really! They largely continue to deny or obfuscate our water problems.

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Some within the educated GOP know of "the foresight of the federal government at the turn of the 20th century to invest money in infrastructure like dams, canals, and pipelines to move water where it is needed the most and to store it in times of drought." But there's no understanding of such facts today. President Joe Biden wants to build more infrastructure to address this problem, but McCarthy, McConnell, and friends refuse any smart investments for the future.

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DN: "Policies, Cox stressed Thursday, will help Utah in these dry times, especially focusing on the need for additional conservation. He added he met with House Speaker Brad Wilson, R-Kaysville, and Senate President Stuart Adams, R-Layton, this week to discuss ways to implement water-saving strategies on the state level." Such statements appear to be like re-runs of old black-and-white films, not fresh new realities.

Cox: "'We are going to be working at putting resources behind a significant conservation push,' he said, adding that won't just be for this year, but long term." Yeah, like his delay of COVID-19 responses until too many Utahns died, and then finally ramping up, after 400,000 became ill, many now suffering long-term effects in their lives, and 2,000-plus died, most unnecessarily.

"The governor said he could envision a changing landscape for Utah, 'wherein new developments we would be eliminating park strips, looking at xeriscaping much more. There's so much more we can do here in the state of Utah.'" Duh! My wife and I, along with many neighbors xeriscaped our yards decades ago. But the state has long lagged in such a vision.

"Also on Wednesday, the state Legislature set aside up to \$280 million for water infrastructure. Of that, lawmakers committed to initially spend \$100 million for water conservation, likely for the metering of secondary water. Still, like those participating in the congressional discussion, Cox acknowledged the need for new infrastructure projects." OK, a reality check for Mr. Cox. With Utah's strong budgets over decades, this ought to have begun years ago, not now.

Cox: “We know that as the fastest-growing state in the nation that we’re going to have to develop new water resources, and we will be proposing and looking at new water resources, but also significant changes in the way we develop and the way we’re careful with water and the use of water,” Cox said. Of course, he’s admitting a crisis, but the solutions could have started in the 1970s! Instead, Utah’s naïve GOP leaders have thought that bringing more people to Utah was good because the government would receive more taxes. In contrast, I wish we’d not recruited outsiders but instead tried to live within our limited water resources.

“U.S. Rep. Blake Moore, R-Utah, said during the Wednesday forum that the drought sweeping across Utah is debilitating beyond what most people can imagine.” ‘Utah is in the midst of a very, very significant drought which poses a challenge for every individual and industry in Utah,’ he said. Thank goodness he warned with a wiser view than his predecessor from Utah’s 1st Congressional District, Rob Bishop, who ignored water preparation that the state has needed for nearly two decades.

“But Utah’s leaders have come under intense criticism from proposed infrastructure developments that include the Lake Powell Pipeline and Bear Lake Development, both state-sanctioned projects that develop additional water resources for the future.”

“Critics say state officials could save the water they plan to divert by pricing it appropriately and forcing more conversation.” I assume this was meant to say “conservation.” Tage Flint said “That it was water development projects developed early in the 20th century that helped Utah and the rest of the West survive drought conditions. But, he stressed — for generations to come in the nation’s fastest-growing state — that same type of foresight needs to be in play.” ‘In my career, this is the worst (drought) and I have been doing this a long time.’

I would add that the state should finally start charging for the actual costs of water. Not a new idea, but it appears Utah Republicans have never considered it. The GOP always claims it believes in free markets, but then subsidizes residential and farm water with cheap costs so people continue to waste many gallons per day in Utah. This seems to be more akin to the imaginary Republican claims of a “Democratic Socialist agenda,” they harp about daily. Allowing for the massively cheap consumption of precious water resources is the height of recklessness. No responsible leader would do this. By the way, Utahns consume the second-highest amount of water in the country at 169 gallons per capita each and every day. We’re in a mountainous desert, but conservation and stewardship are “foreign” concepts to state leaders and many households.

In conclusion, Mr. Cox now admits ‘We’re heading into one of the worst droughts and potentially one of the worst fire seasons that we’ve seen.’ True, but state and local officials will still not make real fines with teeth in them to punish unwise and careless people. The majority of fires in our state are human-caused, yet significant. Many are started by lax and unthinking residents. At times they are from farmers trying to clear some land, but their small burn may grow out of control quickly, entering the desert or forest areas rapidly. Even worse are irresponsible gun owners out in the wilds doing target practice. The dry ground throughout the state becomes a veritable tinder box of destruction. Then there are the crazy fireworks that I believe need to be banned completely. In 2020 there were a record 1,547 outdoor fires in Utah with 1,202 (78 percent) human-caused, surpassing 2015's record of 937 large blazes. They accounted for almost 100,000 of the 329,000 total acres burned during last season. Predictably, things will likely be worse in 2021.

Utah needs wiser, more responsible water policies to preserve our precious legacy and be smarter stewards of our natural resources. The state should require sensible solutions to protect lives, property, and nature. Yet the likelihood of implementing such policies by Utah politicians is probably zero. (Author, Dr. Warner Woodworth of Utah)

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SocialEntrepreneur

Community (This content is not subject to review by Daily Kos staff prior to publication.)

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SocialEntrepreneur [AUTHOR](#)

May 23, 2021 at 09:26:03 PM

Tip Jar

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Ojibwa

May 23, 2021 at 10:07:35 PM

Thanks. The politics of water in the west has often been driven by anti-science philosophies. (Disclosure: my doctoral dissertation was on the politics of water resource development.)

2 Replies

14Recommended

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SocialEntrepreneur [AUTHOR](#)

Ojibwa

May 24, 2021 at 11:06:40 AM

Anti-science, for sure. Thanks. Where'd you get your PhD?

1 Reply

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Ojibwa
SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

May 24, 2021 at 02:19:37 PM

University of Arizona. I was part of a multi-disciplinary team studying water resources in the state. The project was housed in the Department of Agricultural Economics.

1 Reply

1Recommended

SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**
Ojibwa

May 24, 2021 at 02:42:19 PM

Nice. Congratulations!

0 Replies

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argusx2002
Ojibwa

May 24, 2021 at 11:41:10 AM

Water is very political. Nations have fought wars over water and some are threatening it even now.

0 Replies

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Lefty Coaster

May 23, 2021 at 10:27:05 PM

Utah's situation looks dire.

U.S. Drought Monitor Utah

1 Reply

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jlms qkw

Lefty Coaster

May 24, 2021 at 09:19:03 AM

It's grim. We have had a couple cool damp days here and there this spring but it is grim as I understand it.

1 Reply

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

jlms qkw

May 24, 2021 at 11:07:30 AM

I agree. It's grim and will soon become devastating. Thanks.

0 Replies

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blooc17

May 23, 2021 at 11:23:24 PM

Well Mike Lee told us all to just have more babies when climate change was mentioned in the senate. Not sure what the Mormons think is going to happen in the long run. End of days? Move somewhere else? At least Az. had a few long range planners years ago, but no one planned on the population increase that we're had.

3 Replies

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PrahaPartizan
blooc17

May 24, 2021 at 06:49:37 AM

Nah, I'll tell you what I think Republicans want to happen when they need water resources in the West for the populations — those stupid folks back East will gladly pony up and pay for the infrastructure to bring water from back East out West. I firmly believe Republican politicians think the blue state Congress critters will authorize construction to bring water from the only source really remaining in the lower 48 — the Great Lakes. That will be for free to, while those conservative states, mostly in the Southwest are sending pricey oil and natural gas back East for power and heating purposes in yet another example of “Socialism for me; capitalism for thee.” It's always worked in the past, why not now?

1 Reply

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Odysseus
PrahaPartizan

May 24, 2021 at 04:51:15 PM

those stupid folks back East will gladly pony up and pay for the infrastructure to bring water from back East out West.

You keep your beady eyes off my Great Lake.

0 Replies

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Clutch Cargo
blooc17

May 24, 2021 at 10:17:31 AM

The right wing enthusiasm for extreme procreation never ceases to amaze me or to offend me. We are seeing right now what can happen to a region with high population density in the

tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic's effect on India. Several regions of India also periodically suffer from severe water shortages.

0 Replies

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**
blooc17

May 24, 2021 at 11:14:46 AM

Yep, crazy Mike is still trying to wrap his head around ignorance, his subversive GOP senate colleagues, and his suggestion about having kids. I think he was hoping more Republicans would have more babies to counter the explosive births in Black, Latino, and other minority populations. If he'd taken a math course in school, he'd understand trends about population growth. As the GOP continues to shrink, a better America is rising that will vote for climate programs, and against racism, insurrectionists, and his party's many injustices.

0 Replies

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daidsites

May 23, 2021 at 11:42:07 PM

Denver is trying to steal water from the west slope and it will only make matters worse. There's significant opposition in Boulder (mostly NIMBY) where the reservoir will be expanded but it looks like the decision has been made. I'm surprised that downstream states and Mexico don't have more say in the matter.

3 Replies

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CanyonD

daidsites

May 24, 2021 at 03:01:59 AM

The Front Range already "steals" western slope water. It could not support its current population without it. The system (e.g, see "Windy Gap") is a gift from Uncle Sugar. It was a 1950's giveaway to Ag producers who, over time, have sold their water rights to thirsty cities

for millions are dried up their farms. Socialism at it's finest — the taxpayers provide a resource for a few, the few sell the resource back to the taxpayers at a massive profit.

The reservoir you refer to is Gross Reservoir and it takes in western slope water. The expansion will just allow the reservoir to hold more — it doesn't provide any additional allocated water rights or flows to fill it — so the downstream states don't get a say.

1 Reply

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RockyMtnHigh
CanyonD

May 25, 2021 at 08:12:41 AM

Western Colorado tried to get the best deal they could, including some protections for base stream flows, precluding more future diversions by Denver, and \$ for watershed restoration. But while that's helpful in the most impacted local area, the mass balance problem of reduced total flows going downstream remains. Lake Powell continues to drop and lower basin states continue to use more water than their 'shares' under the compact or than can be sustained over time. "Overuse, then pray for a series of really wet years to bail you out" is not a real strategy, and there will be a reckoning.

0 Replies

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blue aardvark
davidsites

May 24, 2021 at 05:06:08 AM

They do. Water rights are a matter of treaty and agreement.

0 Replies

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**
davidsites

May 24, 2021 at 11:20:36 AM

Thanks for this news. I always admired Boulder and Denver, as well. Pretty weird that such water fights are occurring in my beloved Colorado. Of course, the state recently gave us the dangerous, gun-tote'n Lauren Boebert:)

0 Replies

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fourthcornerman

May 24, 2021 at 02:14:07 AM

Utah needs wiser, more responsible water policies

Utah needs wiser, more responsible voters and politicians. However, that drought seems destined to continue and deepen.

What Utah will get is a water shortage so critical it will cripple the state and force emigrations.

Nature will not be deterred by human vanity.

4 Replies

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jlms qkw

fourthcornerman

May 24, 2021 at 09:19:48 AM

Utah needs a more diverse legislature and less to no gerrymandering.

1 Reply

2 Recommended

blooc17

jlms qkw

May 24, 2021 at 05:59:25 PM

And less people that think that "god" gave them the land to use.....

0 Replies

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

fourthcornerman

May 24, 2021 at 11:21:09 AM

You're absolutely correct.

0 Replies

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**
fourthcornerman

May 24, 2021 at 12:11:37 PM

I agree, fourthcornerman. The drought will accelerate, while “wise” politicians are not being elected much. So I believe the shortage will become worse until it takes down lots of businesses in my state and the West. Then, Utah’s legislative vanity will finally be humbled. Who knows, maybe our long-term gerrymandering by corrupt GOP officials will begin to turn toward what Utah used to enjoy, actual democracy.

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**
fourthcornerman

May 24, 2021 at 12:14:21 PM

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0 Replies

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javax2

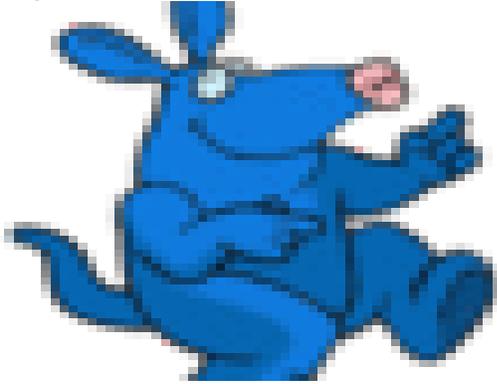
May 24, 2021 at 04:43:06 AM

We haven't had enough water since the days Phelan and Mulholland.

0 Replies

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blue aardvark

May 24, 2021 at 05:05:15 AM

With climate change, the wet gets wetter and the dry gets drier. And Utah, being dry, will get drier, except maybe the Wasatch range.

And even if we stabilized CO2 where it is, climate change will continue to get worse, as there's a delay.

1 Reply

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

blue aardvark

May 24, 2021 at 11:22:44 AM

I think you're absolutely correct. Thanks!

0 Replies

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argusx2002

May 24, 2021 at 07:26:39 AM

We really need policies and laws to gradually redirect people to live in places that are better situated to people. We have some who live where there is no water and others who live where

there is too much water. We have flood insurance and all sorts of other programs that make these more palatable to people but I think that needs to change.

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

argusx2002

May 24, 2021 at 11:28:29 AM

Argus, I agree. I'm thinking a solution would be to move GOPers to new communities on the moon. Or better yet, on Mars now that we've landed on the Red Planet and they currently live in the so-called Red States. Then wise management of water use could be implemented by the Democratic USA without right-wing resistance to science and wise stewardship.

0 Replies

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jlms qkw

May 24, 2021 at 09:20:26 AM

I wish the author would engage on some of these comments. They obviously have the expertise.

1 Reply

2 Recommended

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

jlms qkw

May 24, 2021 at 11:29:31 AM

I like your suggestion. See my comments now that I have had a few minutes at home. And please share your thoughts, as well.

0 Replies

2 Recommended

cmax

May 24, 2021 at 10:52:44 AM

Mormonism runs rampant in the west. The legislatures in Idaho, Utah and Nevada are overrepresented by Mormons. The large agricultural businesses are sucking the Snake River dry. States have already sucked the Colorado river dry. Water rights for irrigation are based on the Mormons building canals everywhere. There's just too many people and not enough water. Where does southern California and Nevada get their water from? Is it sustainable?

Dominionism.

1 Reply

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

cmax

May 24, 2021 at 11:43:25 AM

Great term, "Dominionism." I agree with several of your points. Yes, my church has a strong presence in the West, but it continues to shrink in much of the country, including here in Utah. State membership is currently around 62 percent, and as more skilled workers move here for all the growing tech jobs, the trend will continue. I agree the three state legislatures you speak about have too many LDS seats. But if LDS Dems had a stronger presence than LDS Republicans, it would be more acceptable to me. They're generally better educated and accept science, climate change, immigration, etc. I grew up during past decades of wise LDS Democrats controlling Utah's politics in our legislative bodies, governorship, as well as U.S. representation in the U.S. Senate and House. That was the reality until the "Californication" of my state occurred when Reagan Republicans began flowing into Utah from Orange Co., CA. Utah politics have gone downhill ever since.

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blooc17

SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

May 24, 2021 at 06:02:06 PM

I live in Mesa az. I've heard of an LDS Dem but think I've only met one...I guess I'll find out this year as I signed up to be a precinct captain in a largely mormon district.

0 Replies

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Wolfound

May 24, 2021 at 11:25:49 AM

Conservatives rarely conserve. They should read "Eager" by Ben Goldfarb, but they won't. As soon as it becomes apparent that they are reading a book about sane ecological remedies for the water problem, they will start shouting, "Hippie! Commie! Tree Hugger! Fluoridation! Cold Dead Fingers. God Told Us To Shoot Beavers!", before dissolving into an incoherent blob of froth as their minds collapse into a singularity of self-imposed ignorance.

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SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

Wolfound

May 24, 2021 at 11:54:53 AM

Fun comments, Wolfound! I often used books like McPhie's "Encounters with the Archdruid" and my old friend Ed Abbey's classic "The Monkeywrench Gang."

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cmax

SocialEntrepreneur **AUTHOR**

May 24, 2021 at 07:44:04 PM

Seems like the west could use some monkeywrenching. Hayduke lives?

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DailyEnigma

May 24, 2021 at 06:07:56 PM

They want their enemies to die, and will gladly suffer to ensure it.

They are a death cult, and need to be treated as such.

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wasatch

May 25, 2021 at 12:53:28 AM

It doesn't help that fireworks season lasts from July 4th to July 24th (Pioneer Day).

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by Portland True Blue

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