

When we hear the words “Water Wars,” our minds immediately shift to the Middle East, where we see one dry desert nation pressed up against another. Or at least to the American Southwest, where Arizona, New Mexico and other states compete for the precious waters of the Colorado River.

But the fact is that across America, communities large and small are battling for water. It is not an occasional flare-up, either. It is a continuing battle, one that is becoming more acute as populations grow and water resources diminish.

An interesting exercise is to go to the Lexis/Nexis information service and type in Water Wars. In a matter of minutes, the computer screen flashes with hundreds of stories. They come from regions big and small—from Midwestern hamlets battling over drilling rights, to big cities, where the politicians stand before the TV lights, debating whether the city’s water is safe to drink.

For example:

- In Seattle, the city fathers and the Muckleshoot Indian tribe have locked horns over the use of the Cedar River Watershed. The city wants to pull 50% more water out of the river. The Muckleshoots argue that that move will lower the river and harm the Chinook salmon and other animals. Meanwhile, in another part of Washington State, landowners in the town of Winthrop are up in arms because federal forest service officials cut off water to six critical canals. The federal government claims the cutoff is required to save salmon, steelhead and other fish on the Endangered Species Act list. But, said Winthrop’s mayor, “It’s our water... and without it, our land will dry up.”
- In Arco, Idaho, townspeople are battling local farmers. The townsfolk say the farmers are draining off the Big Lost River to water their crops, leaving the riverbeds to dry and the cottonwood and willow trees to lose their leaves and die. The focus of the townspeople’s anger has been focused on the Idaho Department of Water Resources, which permitted the agricultural interests to pump the river down.
- Meanwhile, in Colorado, rural homeowners are watching their wells go dry. In response, some counties are slapping restrictions on growth. One county now requires developers to prove that their rural subdivisions have sufficient water resources now—and enough water for the next 100 years to come. Meanwhile, a plan by a developer to pump water from the San Luis Valley to Colorado’s dry Front Range communities has caused outrage. If development continues, warned Colorado’s state attorney general, “We’re going to see the beginning of another huge water war.”
- In Arizona, water conflicts between adjoining states, cities, the federal government, farmers and Native Americans continue unabated, as they have for the last one hundred years. At one heated public meeting, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt remarked, “If peace can come to Northern Ireland, there’s at least a chance we can be successful.” To which Arizona Senator Jon Kyle replied, “Northern Ireland is only about religion. We’re talking about water!”
- San Diego, meanwhile, is taking steps to break away from its historic, and tense relationship with Los Angeles and the region’s water wholesaler, the ultra-political Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. This would entail securing a water supply of its own in the Imperial Valley and toward building its first new reservoir in more than a quarter of a century. Water is so scarce that one councilman has argued for the city to requisition ocean-going tankers—and fill them with Canadian water.
- Go across the nation to St. Petersburg, Florida, and you find an equally acrimonious debate—this centered on everything from the insatiable thirst of St. Pete and Tampa, to the debate over which communities should chip in for desalinization plants. There has even been a running battle between environmentalists and bottled water supplier Perrier, which wants to expand its local pumping operations in the region. People are getting mad: When Tampa Bay Water announced plans to pump water out from under the land of 75-year-old farmer Zane Blanton, some 300 local residents stormed out in his defense.

## **US Overview**

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- In another part of the South, tempers have flared in Atlanta as the EPA charged that the city's water had been contaminated by sloppy water purification controls. In fact, water was the Big Issue in Atlanta's 1999 mayoral race—with one candidate contending that the city water was safe to drink (and drinking a glass of it on stage during a live TV debate) and the other saying it wasn't (and refusing to sip a drop for the cameras).
- In New York, meanwhile, city officials have been battling to restrict growth in Putnam County, the upstate New York region from which the Big Apple draws its water. Of course, Putnam County is having none of it: Eight thousand new homes are planned for the county, in a wave of urbanization that the city fears will send nutrients and waste spilling into the city's 19 Putnam County reservoirs.
- Even in Chicago, which sits at the rim of the largest body of fresh water in the world, has its water battles. In Chicago's case, there is debate over who should clean up the Chicago River and other waterways. Even the cost of water is a hot issue in Chicago: Last year, the Chicago Sun reported that even though Chicago is on the rim of Lake Michigan, and even though Chicago city residents have low water rates, the residents of 150 communities surrounding Chicago pay four times as much for their water as do Phoenix, Arizona residents. And therein lies a fight.

So water wars are flaring across the United States. The following “spot reports,” by outstanding American environmental journalists, give more insight into the conditions that make water a contentious issue in America, from sea to shining sea.