



## The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman  
Columnist

### Cool Water

Out here in the West water is precious, particularly when living on the east side of any mountain range between the Sierra-Cascades and the Rockies. Eastsiders live within a perpetual loop of drought and diminishing returns. The diminishing returns are a result of aggressive settlement beyond the 100th meridian, which has been a desert since before the end of the last Ice Age.

The illusion of abundance in the western deserts was easy enough to sustain for more than a hundred years because the impacts of so many people were spread over hundreds of thousands of square miles. Even the larger hydrology projects such as the draining of the Klamath Basin (which destroyed the Klamath Basin) or the construction of the LA Aqueduct (which destroyed the Owens Valley) primarily impacted rural areas.

In those deeply rural areas — which in both the Klamath and Owens cases also happened to be major stopping points along the Pacific Flyway — the few people living there had virtually no power to prevent what remains the insane vision of settling millions upon millions of people in a desert.

In California, where 25.5 million acres of land are given over to farming in the production of some 400 separate commodities — even as many of those crops and commodities are falling inexorably into the monoculture trap and are owned by hostile foreign entities — the essential water infrastructure has not been updated since the WPA projects of the 1930s.

In 1930 there were less than six million people living in California. Today there are over 40 million people, and many millions more that don't show up on a census. Most of those people take showers every day, wash their dishes and clothes, brush their teeth, flush toilets, water their lawns and gardens, wash their cars, irrigate their fields, or use up water in any number of other daily activities. In California, the average person uses 71 gallons of water every day. And in parts of the central valley, where more than 100,000 irrigation wells draw from 20,000-year-old aquifers, the valley floor has dropped nearly 30 feet.

This winter the Sierra snowpack stands at 136 percent of normal. It is the fifth-highest snowload ever recorded in the Sierras. That's great news except that California is unable to capture significant portions of the 580 billion gallons of water that snow represents, because environmental regulations prohibit the building of new dams and reservoirs.

This is true even as the collapse of the Oroville dam last year exposed significant problems in the existing infrastructure. And because they can't capture the water, record snowfalls and atmospheric rivers don't mean as much as they otherwise might.

Here in Central Oregon we have been clobbered by a late-February snowstorm. Estimates vary but even in Sisters, at a mere 3,100 feet elevation, we've received three or more feet of snow. Our local reservoirs, from Crane Prairie to Wickiup, are reportedly full.

Crane Prairie reservoir has a carrying capacity of more than 55,000 acre-feet of water. Wickiup is capable of carrying some 200,000 acre-feet of water. Having those reservoirs full for households, recreation, and irrigation is a celebratory event, but the question for us remains: how do we propose to sustain the ever-increasing demands we will put on an arbitrary and therefore finite resource?

Central Oregon, with a growth rate now reliably over 3.5 percent annually, is filling up with people, and because we are occasionally enchanted by an abundance of water we don't seem to be discussing the most important long-term question: At what point do we reach critical human mass?

Oregonians nurture a superior attitude toward most things California, but they don't seem to be learning many of the long-term lessons that California offers, and meaningful distinctions between the two states are diminishing to the point of

non-existence.

When my wife and I first married we lived in Lake Almanor, California. Our home at the lake, near an inlet called Hamilton Branch, backed into the forest and was about a quarter-mile from the shore. The house we lived in was built by my wife's great-grandfather, who found success in the citrus groves of southern California as an early beneficiary of the LA aqueduct. He built a thriving farm in the desert with that water, taking advantage of decent soil and perfect weather. But those groves are all gone now, given over to urban sprawl and gargantuan housing developments that use far more water than the groves ever did.

What fascinates me, as I contemplate the future of our own water resources, is that some 30 feet below the

surface of Lake Almanor sits the town of Prattville. Prattville is a quiet favorite among mountain lake divers, a club of hearty souls in the same phylum as cavers, and people who see the world with a very different awareness of its history. A good mountain diver can drop into Lake Almanor and fin between the treetops of Big Meadow, or watch the fish swim through windows of the Prattville General Store.

In the modern West we have as many challenges as we do options. We can choose to embrace certain realities the planet offers us, or we can ignore them. But one thing is absolutely certain: The West is a desert, and without enough water we will some day, inevitably, share the same drastic future, whatever our most passionately held beliefs may happen to be.

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