

Will water crisis be California's third-world moment?

Todd Fitchette, Western Farm Press, 12-19-13

While a prolonged lack of precipitation draws some media attention, growers in California are making painful decisions regarding which crops to water next year and what land to fallow. Compounding decisions related to a promised water allocation to federal contractors of 5 percent is the growing acreage of permanent crops farmers planted and the simple fact that without water, the crops will die.

It's a situation that should not have to be so bad. But it is.

Ten cities in America are on a media-watch list of municipalities that "could run out of water." Three of these – San Jose, San Diego, and Los Angeles – share one major commonality that has little to do with the state in which they reside. All three California cities have an almost endless supply of untapped water at their doorstep called the Pacific Ocean.

While the ocean is obviously not an immediate source of fresh water, mankind has the technology – certainly the U.S. Navy does – to desalinate water and make it potable. After the recent super typhoon that ravaged the Philippines, it was the U.S. Navy that went in with ships and began desalinating significant quantities of water for residents affected by the storm.

Why can't we do that in our cities?

Why must Los Angeles, for instance, siphon water from the Eastern Sierra and arm wrestle Nevada and Arizona over Colorado River water rather than build desalination facilities? The environmental hazard that has been the drying of Owens Lake in eastern California's Owens Valley could be cured quite easily if the Owens River were allowed to fill the lake instead of being conveyed south to fill swimming pools and water lawns.

While efforts are being made to address some of California's long-term water woes through the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and a real proposal to increase the capacity of Shasta Lake by raising the dam – I say "real" because an actual environmental document has been prepared and public comments submitted – officials elected by Californians to make the real tough decisions have failed, year in and year out; instead, they continue to kick the dry can down the proverbial dirt road.

While California agriculture has steadily had its water supplies cut, too many people with too many straws in too few water sources are going to force the issue of this political inaction, and the outcome is not going to be pretty. Our first-world problems of cell phone tower overload and spotty Wi-Fi connections will cease to matter when third-world problems like a lack of water becomes very real for the cities and we have to import all of our food requirements because we can't grow it ourselves.