

Import our water from wetter climes? It's a pipe dream

George Skelton, Los Angeles Times, 4-27-15

If it only were this simple: Build a pipeline to Seattle and solve California's water problems.

Better yet: Lay pipe to the Great Lakes.

Or sink pipe on the ocean floor and siphon water from Alaska.

While we're at it, tow an iceberg down from the Arctic.

All these ideas and more have been suggested over the decades.

Let's get right to the point: They're all nutty. Politically and financially unfeasible.

But hardly a day passes without some emailer wondering why our political leaders don't possess enough ingenuity and foresight to go out and grab another state's water.

The latest came as I was writing this. Jerry Rosenstein of Santa Monica asked: "Why can't an environmentally sound, low-cost pipe/pumping system be strategically built throughout the United States? This water transfer system would be able to move water inexpensively from one location to another...."

"Such a system would have benefited both coasts this past winter. Boston didn't know what to do with [its heavy] snow. California is suffering through the worst drought in our history."

Well, for starters Jerry, there is no such thing as a "low-cost" pipe-pumping system, and the water certainly would not be moved "inexpensively."

But this is a concept that never dies.

Last week, actor William Shatner told Yahoo's David Pogue in an interview that he wanted to raise \$30 billion to build a water pipeline to the rainy northwest.

Although that's a lot of money, it might not stretch far enough even for a down payment on this project.

Said Shatner, who owns a Tulare County ranch: "I'm starting a Kickstarter campaign. I want \$30 billion ... to build a pipeline like the Alaska pipeline. Say, from Seattle — a place where there's a lot of water...."

"How bad would it be to get a large, 4-foot pipeline, keep it above ground — because if it leaks, you're irrigating. Bring it down here and fill one of our lakes — Lake Mead."

OK, a couple of things:

What? California is going to build a pipeline to the northwest and then pour the water into a lake that straddles Nevada and Arizona? Not even if we get a big cut of the Vegas Strip winnings and all of Arizona's spring training camps.

Second, a 4-foot pipeline is the equivalent of a small garden hose when you're talking about our water needs. This isn't for oil, after all. A motorist might use one to two gallons of gasoline a day. But he'll use 100 to 200 gallons of water at home.

For comparison, Brown is trying to build two highly controversial, 40-foot wide water tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. The price tag for the tunnels alone is around \$17 billion and it's only a 30-mile project. The driving distance from Seattle to Sacramento is roughly 750 miles.

Another comparison: The California Aqueduct that carries water from the delta down into the San Joaquin Valley and over the Tehachapi Mountains into Southern California is 150-foot wide at the top and 30-foot deep over a long stretch.

"It's big and dangerous and slimy," says state water department spokeswoman Nancy Vogel.

More Shatner: "It's simple. They did it in Alaska. Why can't they do it along Highway 5?"

Answer: I-5 isn't tundra. All those Washington and Oregon motel, restaurant and gas station owners might not like being displaced by a California water pipe.

And unlike in California, we can't condemn people's property in other states.

Shatner's conclusion: "If I don't make \$30 billion, I'll give the money to a politician who says, 'I'll build it.'"

OK, Bill, I'm no politician. But count me in. I'll build it. When will your check be in the mail?

Seriously, someone would need to pay for this pipeline. And as in most public works projects, it would be the user. Think you've got a high water bill now? Wait until your water comes from Seattle or the Great Lakes.

We'd be back to once-a-week bathing

Again, oil and water are like the proverbial apples and oranges. (The proposed Keystone XL pipeline, incidentally, would have only been 3 feet wide.)

Water's dirt cheap compared to oil, which means less construction capital for much bigger pipes.

In many areas, I'm told by experts, you can tap into 50 gallons of water at home for about half the cost of one gallon of gas at the pump.

There'd also be the cost of buying electricity to pump the water.

We'd need to buy water rights. We own none beyond our border.

"The cost would be prohibitive," Vogel says.

And the politics impossible. Those states, I'm sure, would just love to free up their water for poor California. We couldn't offer enough payoffs to all the legislatures.

If we did manage to build a monster pipe across the West, would there be any water left after even drier states dipped their straws into it?

"The expense and the politics is so unrealistic it's a distraction from the projects we actually can get done," says Lester Snow, a former state water director who heads the private California Water Foundation.

Those projects, he says, include implementing a new groundwater management law, capturing storm runoff, recycling, conservation and recharging aqueducts. Practical stuff.

It's time to wake up from the pipe dream and smell the coffee — one cup requiring 35 gallons of water to make.