

No-Go With the Flow: Water Politics in Israel and California

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California is in the midst of the worst drought in recorded history. An anticipation of El Nino and an early winter snow have made people hopeful for rising water tables. Projects throughout the state have attempted to address water shortages, including recommending wastewater programs. Recently, a desalination plant was announced for Santa Clara County.

Twenty-four municipalities and two private organizations affiliated with Hetch Hetchy Water System, administered by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and part of the Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency have been involved in a long-range water conservation program. Initially announced in 2009, BAWSCA projected drastic circumstances confronting Northern California, including possible water shortages and industrial divestment as companies were forced to relocate due to water shortages. By the time it presented the first report of its conservation efforts, the forecast was much rosier, contending that water conservation efforts initiated a year before its initial assessment had worked.

While the projections put forth don't exactly add up, there were also anticipations of securing additional water during drought years through "water transfer" projects that included diverting water from the Yuba River, which is part of the Central Valley Authority and administered by the Bureau of Land Reclamation. As San Francisco and municipalities in its BAWSCA network record moderate water reductions, entire communities in the Central Valley have experience increased unemployment as fields are idled in order to do their part for water conservation.

<http://www.sfgate.com/.../California-drought-jobs-money-dry-u...>

BAWSCA acknowledges that the proliferation of the tech industry in the Silicon Valley area is a large consumer of water resources. And many projects are being considered for offsetting the problems experienced by the drought. Among them are increased investment and consideration of water desalination technologies, a sector that has been highly developed in Israel and considered an inspiration for addressing California's water issues. At the same time, heavy water use industries, including fracking for oil and natural gas, continue to be large water consumers and private companies are able to access California water ways without having to pay for the water they use to then in turn sell it for profit.

A long term view of this situation and an understanding of dynamics surrounding water usage around the world is instructive. BAWSCA contracts with CDM Smith, a large scale water and utility engineering firm with operations in most states in the US, as well as the West Bank and El Salvador. Since 2000, Israel has been intentionally diverting water from

aquifers in the West Bank to meet the consumption needs of Israelis, while allotting less than one-quarter of the per person amount to Palestinians and requiring them to purchase a large percent of their water from Israel, despite the fact that the water they are purchasing comes from sources within the West Bank.

<http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.574554>

In fact, the construction of Israel's "security barrier" was intentionally designed to encompass settlements located above or near the major aquifer sites in the West Bank and Palestinians are required to obtain permits from Israeli authorities in order to access indigenous sources. Throughout the process, CDM Smith has been operating water facilities throughout the West Bank and Gaza. As part of Israel's assault on Gaza last summer, the only water treatment plant serving Palestinians was destroyed. A cursory look of the company's site reveals that in the past two months, several job openings have been announced for its facilities in the West Bank and Gaza.

Meanwhile, Israel has been able to develop desalination technology that is considered to be pioneering in the world.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rr0ReW8U2Ns>

This is the very same technology it is now trying to export to California. This technology came at the cost of an entire nation's infrastructure and access to water, not to mention the impact it has had on Palestinian agriculture alongside the Israeli policies of destroying Palestinian land and industry. One can not overlook that California's water rights policies, which privilege "senior" water rights holders—a seniority which entails the historical exclusion of entire communities along with the dispossession of indigenous water access—and allow for the destruction of agricultural communities primarily comprised of immigrants, correspond to the ways in which urban areas like San Francisco determine water consumption. Add into this the fact that the private, for-profit corporations that are "stewarding" the water access issues have been complicit in Israeli policies to destroy Palestinian society, and one sees a recurrent pattern that is ultimately as immoral as it is unsustainable.

Without some serious consideration of how the inequalities stemming from the privatization of water and utility access compound social and economic, as well as environmental, problems and correspond to unequal distribution of resources both in California and around the world, life as we know it will soon become obsolete. A true overhaul of our resource distribution system is necessary immediately. These resources start with equal and non-profit-driven access to basic human rights like food and water, homes, jobs, non-militarized security and education and extend to non-privatized access and respect for the land and communities that sustain it. It's not just the right thing to do—it's the only way we're going to survive.

Charity Crouse is a writer and activist currently existing in California. She is an now witting but ultimately unwilling and non-compliant accomplice to San Francisco's water tyranny.

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