News We Don’t Want to Believe Department—Climate Change Could Increase “Dead Zones”

Readers of TUWW are used to seeing stories about waters so low in oxygen (hypoxia) that they are called “dead zones” and stories about recent dispatches from the front lines of climate change science and policy. This week we report on a new study that links those two threads. A report from researchers at the Smithsonian, published in the journal Global Change Biology, finds that factors associated with climate change are magnifying the problem of hypoxia in lakes, streams, and coastal waters. It is not really news that warmer temperatures can induce algae growth in nutrient rich water (think fertilizer here, in part) that can cause aquatic oxygen levels to crater. The study goes beyond the temperature/nutrient link to explore less obvious chemical and physical links. The conclusion: Climate change is a bigger driver of hypoxia than previously thought, and the problem is likely to get worse. That is not news anybody was looking for.

“I want to say one word to you, just one word. Water.”

Okay, in the classic 1967 film the Graduate, the word was “plastics,” but today the one word of advice to a young graduate might well be water. In support of that view comes a new Stanford University-led report called The Path to Water Innovation. The report is based on the universally unpopular but broadly true proposition that water in the United States is underpriced. Among the report’s findings is that due to legal and structural barriers, the water sector has failed to attract venture capital and corporate capital investments. The report has suggestions for lowering those barriers (with a focus mostly on the western United States) but does acknowledge some will be “politically challenging.” The report is part of a broader Hamilton Project that is aimed at fostering economic growth, opportunity, and prosperity. The project is named after founding father Alexander Hamilton, who we suspect was very fond of water.

Georgia v. Army Corps of Engineers—For Every Action There is an Equal and Opposite Reaction

Further proof of the physics of water law comes by way of the Alabama-Coosa-Tallahooosa (ACF) river basin shared by Georgia and Alabama. In roughly simultaneous actions the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released its final Environmental Impact Statement for its new “Master Manual” for managing the ACF river system, and the State of Georgia filed suit against
the Corps. At issue in the lawsuit are the Corps plans for Lake Allatoona, a reservoir in the metro-Atlanta region fed largely by the Etowah River (We, know it sounds like William Faulkner made most of these names up). Georgia would like more water in the Lake to be used to supplement drinking water supplies for metro-Atlanta, and they accuse the Corps of favoring downstream Alabama and its water needs over theirs. In its EIS, the Corps does not consider the additional water allocations sought by Georgia. If this seems Byzantine, that is not the half of it. The management of Lake Allatoona, that ACF and the more famous/infamous fights over the Apalachicola, Chattahoochee, and Flint River system (see last week’s TUWW for the latest on that) are all part and parcel of the ongoing death spiral that is multistate water management between Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. As an aside for folks interested in the fate of communities impacted by water resources projects, Lake Allatoona is named for the town of Allatoona, GA, which as they say in New Orleans, “ain’t there no more” thanks to the creation of the Lake.

Round Up the Posse Pardner, There Are Water Rustlers to Catch

There two good ways to tell if something is valuable. One is by its price; the other is whether people want to steal it. As noted above, a strong argument can be made that water is underpriced, especially if supply and demand is the measure. Further evidence that water is worth more than we customarily pay comes from reports that water is being stolen in California. That’s right, water rustlers stealing from water tanks, fire hydrants, and who know where else. Once upon a time that could get a fellow shot—and sometimes did—but today it is apparently a minor misdemeanor in California. In Contra Costa County at least, the fine may be increasing from $25 to up to $500.

If You Plan It, It Will Come – Maybe: Denver’s Search for 163 Billion Gallons of Water

Two things seem axiomatic for western cities like Denver, Colorado. First is that continued population growth is a given, and second is that the water all those people need will be found. Somehow, some way, from somewhere. According to the Denver Post, a state water plan, ordered by Governor Hickenlooper, is about to be released that would soothe the water needs of the dry “Front Range” where Denver is located with more water diverted from the wetter but less populous Western Slope and possibly other basins. In Colorado, water is piped under the mountains to move it from one basin to another. The trouble is that water may not actually be there and what water there is has been spoken for. That means hard bargaining lies ahead. One projected loser is agriculture, as water currently used for irrigation gets retargeted to urban and industrial development. Planners are searching for water and consensus, which is a fine endeavor. But when push comes to shove, plans and consensus don’t taste the same as actual water. This will be a good one to watch and learn from.