

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Drought watch: just a prelude?

It's been a very dry summer. Last week, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection declared a drought watch for Berks, Montgomery, and 34 other Pennsylvania counties.

We've had droughts in the past, and this one's likely to pass before too much damage is done. But it's a reminder that as climate change increases the number and severity of extreme weather events, southeastern Pennsylvania is not immune from disaster.

As we recently pointed out, Pottstown takes about 4 million gallons of water daily from the Schuylkill River, and the PECO nuclear power plant in Limerick consumes up to 58 million gallons of water a day from the river.

For two weeks now, the 150,000 residents of Jackson, the capital of Mississippi, have been without water after the Pearl River flooded out its water treatment plant. Residents will need to use bottled water for drinking, washing and cooking indefinitely.

Jackson's problems pale in comparison to Pakistan, where three months of steady rainfall, following record-breaking heat, have left a third of the country under water.

That's an area the combined size of Pennsylvania, New York, and New England.

More than a million homes have been damaged or destroyed, 162 bridges have been damaged and 2,000 miles of roads have been washed away.

After the floods recede, the mixture of high temperatures and stagnant water will spread waterborne diseases.

Pakistan faces a growing food crisis, while neighboring India, suffering through a severe drought, has substantially reduced food exports.

In southeastern China, a record-setting drought and heat wave are wreaking havoc. River flows are too

low to allow hydropower generation, which has caused the rationing of electricity, the closing of factories, and increased use of coal-burning power plants.

Low river flows have also forced the diversion of cargo from ships to trucks, which are much less efficient than barges and create far more pollution.

Meanwhile, the worst drought in 1,200 years continues to dehydrate the West from Oregon to

Texas. Lake Mead, Nevada, the nation's largest reservoir, which is fed by the Colorado River, has dropped to its lowest point since it

was created by the Hoover Dam in 1935. The Colorado River and its reservoir systems serve 40 million people and irrigate, up to now, 5.5 million acres of farmland. Water rationing and power cuts will soon be necessary.

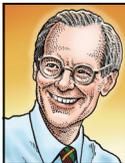
The water level in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, 350 miles north of Lake Mead, has fallen to its lowest level on record. Because of the drought, the lake is just a third of the size it was in 1980.

And yet Utah officials have made no effort to conserve water, even though Salt Lake City's population is expected to grow 50 percent over the next 50 years.

This is just a sampling of current climate extremes. A drought in Europe is so bad you can walk across the Loire River in France, and buses are carrying tourists down along the Rhine River because the river is too shallow in parts to float boats.

Thanks in part to climate change, more than 800 million people — the powerless ones in poor countries — went hungry last year, about 10 percent of the world's population.

The response to all these omens of worldwide catastrophe is more talk of doing something, sometime in the future. As bad as things are, it's not bad enough — yet.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



POTTSTOWN WATER TREATMENT PLANT IN STOWE — We take potable water for granted every hour, every day of the year, but nothing is guaranteed.