



Why Plan for Drought?

Drought is inevitable; it is a normal part of virtually every climate on the planet, even rainy ones. The impacts of drought hit hardest when people place too high a demand on the water supply. Unrealistic expectations often contribute to overestimating the water supply. We can reduce the impact of drought by carefully balancing demand with supply.

It is urgent that we act. More people need more water. As the human population grows, so does the amount of water that humans will need, for drinking, for growing food and for many other uses. It appears that our vulnerability to drought and water shortage is increasing along with our population. Every region of the United States has its own stresses on water supply.

Planning for drought is essential but it doesn't come naturally. Obstacles abound:

- No single definition of drought works in all regions.
- People automatically swing into action when crisis strikes, freely funneling time and money into alleviating suffering and property damage. This is crisis management. But once the crisis is over, it seems like too much trouble to invest the time and resources in planning that could ease the effects of the next drought.
- Responsibility is divided among many governmental jurisdictions.
- The United States lacks a unified philosophy for managing natural resources, including water. A positive side to the drought of 1996 in the southwestern U.S. is that it has yielded a crop of policy initiatives.
- Historic responses to drought have been ad hoc, with special commissions and interagency groups created in response to specific droughts.

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- Policies such as disaster relief and outdated water allocation practices may actually deter good long-term natural resource management.

But there are good reasons to plan for drought — that is, to practice risk management rather than crisis management.

Drought is a low-profile natural disaster, but its effects are as dramatic as those of earthquakes, hurricanes, and other faster-moving disasters. Analysis shows that drought is one of if not the most expensive of natural disasters in developed countries, and that, as a trigger for famine, it can devastate vulnerable populations in developing countries.

Planning ahead to mitigate drought gives decision makers the chance to relieve the most suffering at the least expense.