

The Northeast drought hoax

Leif Johnson examines rainfall levels in New York and New Jersey, reservoir capacity, and ulterior motives.

Crisis-weary New Yorkers are being told by New York City Mayor Edward Koch that the city faces the worst water shortage since the severe 1961-1966 Northeast drought. City reservoirs are at 36 percent of capacity while in neighboring northern New Jersey, the Hackensack Water Company system supplying 850,000 residents is down to 20 percent of capacity or a 30-day supply.

Last week, Mayor Koch ordered that restaurants may not serve a glass of water unless the customer demands it and warned that the third and final phase of a drought emergency may be implemented. This would shut down auto washes, send building inspectors into homes, businesses, and industry looking for leaks, and institute a campaign to reduce water usage.

On Sept. 27, New Jersey Gov. Brendan Byrne ordered a full emergency for the state's seven northern counties, stipulating a 25 percent cut in water consumption and limiting individuals to 50 gallons of water per day. Present per capita consumption is about 150 gallons.

The media campaign to reduce consumption has included a *New York Times* picture of a woman bathing her three-year-old daughter in the waste from her washing machine, and frequent stories attacking industry for failing to cut its use of water.

But there is no drought in either New York City or northern New Jersey. Perplexed citizens read in daily newspapers the figure for total rainfall for the year. On Nov. 25, halfway through a storm, the year's precipitation in New York City totalled 41.8 inches. Average yearly rainfall is 44.9 inches, which means that in the unlikely event of no rain or snow in December, the city would be short a statistically insignificant 3.3 inches.

Nonetheless the media continue to publish scare stories about the lack of rain. In a full-page article with large diagrams, veteran *Times* city reporter Peter Kihss states that as of Sept. 30, 1980, the city had received only 37.8 inches. "This," adds Kihss, "was nearly as low as the 37.3 inches received in the 12 months ending in September 1973, which heralded the last drought emergency."

But New York City water officials point out that Sept. 30 is never used to evaluate the water supply since it follows the normally dry summer. Officials use June 1 as the date when they expect to have reservoirs at or near 100 percent capacity. On that date this year, the New

York City reservoir system was at 98 percent of capacity.

New York's water system is designed to accommodate a five-year drought like the one in the early sixties. The 37.8 inches of rainfall cited by Kihss reflected the fact that this was one of the driest summers in New York history, as the *Times* made front-page note of two months ago, but such short-term fluctuations should have no impact on the water supply.

Although there is no drought in the New York-New Jersey area this year, nor in the immediately preceding year, New Jersey Governor Byrne is predicting a drought next year. Byrne told the state legislature Nov. 24, "We're in tough shape, and the real crunch will come next summer, not this winter." A similarly unexplained prediction was made by New York's deputy chief engineer of watersheds, George Mekenian, who told reporters on Oct. 31, "We've had about as severe a lack of precipitation as we've ever experienced in the first year of a drought."

Water supply expanded

Despite such mystical pronouncements, the fact is that the New York water supply system is underutilized. In 1967 the city brought a new reservoir into the system, adding 14 percent to the capacity, and built a pumping and filtration system to bring 100 million gallons a day in from the Hudson River. The Hudson River facility, which could supply 7.5 percent of the city's daily supply, has never been used and city officials claim they have no plans to put the equipment in shape to supply water.

Water consumption has been rising at about 7 percent a decade, according to New York City water officials, due to greater use of washing machines, dishwashers, air conditioners, and lawn sprinklers. But population in the city is declining, and it is furthermore impossible to tell how much water is lost in broken mains and abandoned buildings. The city's actual water needs are therefore difficult to estimate, but the water supply has increased and can be substantially further increased.

New Jersey's Governor Byrne is using the crisis to abolish the 70-year-old Water Policy and Supply Council and to enhance the powers of New Jersey's Environmental Protection Agency, headed by Mrs. Jerry English. Politically very close to the governor, English is a

leading advocate of putting the New Jersey economy onto a recreational and gambling base rather than an industrial base, and has been a leading spokesman for banning any development of New Jersey's Pine Barrens.

In January 1977, Governor Byrne ordered industrial production cutbacks during that year's natural gas crisis. Since Sept. 27, Byrne has been demanding that all industry reduce water use by 25 percent, even if production suffers as a result.

Byrne is also increasing his crisis management control of the state in conjunction with federal crisis-management personnel. On Oct. 19, during a campaign sweep of the state, President Carter announced a \$6 million emergency appropriation to the state to be administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Another objective of the water hoax is to create the preconditions for passage of New York Sen. Patrick Moynihan's water bill which would continue Carter's "hit list" policy of blocking Western water projects. Under the Moynihan bill, there would be two funding "tracks" for projects, one maintaining the traditional projects, the other defining water projects to include urban flood control, water mains, and reservoirs. The latter track would be funded in block grants to urban areas, especially in the Northeast, and could be used at the discretion of the cities.

Federal tax dollars have been allocated only in areas where the government opts for agricultural and industrial development, but the local tax base is too small to bear the water costs. With the ruin of the Northeast's industry, the tax base for water improvements has eroded, and Northeast versus Western sectional interests can be pitted against one another.

With the Republican sweep in the Senate, however, Patrick Moynihan will no longer head the Senate Water Committee, so the potential for this sectional conflict is diminished.

One of the most perplexing questions in this hoax is where all the water went. There was no drought, no one can account for any extraordinary water use, yet in fact, the reservoirs are at drought levels. The unexplained shortage in Northern New Jersey and New York is estimated to be as high as 100 to 150 billion gallons. This is about 100 days' supply for New York City.

New Jersey political experts have suggested that some of that water may have been intentionally released to create the crisis. In August 1975, the Trenton, New Jersey, water supply was flushed into the Delaware River after a Three Mile Island-type accident. Two valves were simultaneously, accidentally opened, and for three days the city had no water. Brendan Byrne put the city under emergency control, and National Guardsmen stood watch over fire hydrants as residents lined up with pails to obtain cooking water.

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