

Water is for Fighting Over and Other Myths about Water in the West, by John Fleck

Report by Erik Barstow

1. What did you get out of the book?

This book was very interesting to me because it worked through several case studies in the Colorado River Basin. With my relative lack of water background, examples of problems leading to solutions found in the book went a long way in giving me a platform to understand the complex water issues we've faced in the past and will continue to face going forward.

John Fleck goes to great lengths to show that water issues, even in a single basin, are decentralized. There is no one person or entity with their hand on the tap. One person will never have the insight or authority to make a beneficial decision for the good of everyone that needs access to the water. Because of this, collaboration is required. Collaborative efforts must be made even when interests seem to be incongruous on the surface. Instead of viewing other water users (other cities/states, ag vs recreational vs municipal, etc.) as enemies it is important to understand that decisions made on water rights were largely done in good faith. Ag users are making decisions that make sense to them and municipalities are striving to secure the best possible future for their residents. While this is a simple idea, it states that solutions to water problems are not going to be achieved by beating your opponent but rather by finding win-win solutions through advancements in water technology and the laws that govern their use.

The science of water use, while complex in its own right, is argued to be simpler to solve than the laws of how water is distributed. Changing laws will require a complex network of collaborative efforts. There is no silver bullet or one agreement that will solve issues caused by growth or draught. Further, the temptation to panic or quickly turn to litigation could create gridlock in the system. History shows us that when there is less water available, we use less. Advancement in technology will further help. The only way

2. Would I recommend this book?

Yes. I wouldn't classify this book as an exceptionally easy read but the author has a style that I enjoyed, and I found the content fascinating. I was tempted to be hopelessly pessimistic about water issues and it did me quite a lot of good to read such an optimistic take on things. That's not to say the author thinks solutions will be easy to come by. Collaboration on complex problems will require constant dialogue, the building of social capital, and continued innovation. In other words, there is much work to do but it can be done!

3. What points would you like to discuss with the class?

-Fleck states that, "the biggest barrier to that dialogue (*referring to different states, agencies working together within the basin*) is believing our own myths. We have seen, time after time, the myths of conflict, water flowing toward money, and – most importantly -crisis, all dispelled by communities who were able to compromise and conserve." What mythologies do we see here in Northern Colorado? Are we getting in our own way in either the Big Thompson or Cache la Poudre rivers? If so, what would it take to move beyond the myths?

-Fleck also states we need new rules (the science is easy but changing the rules is the tough part). He claims the way forward is for all entities to voluntarily take steps to ensure that all share the burden when water is scarce. Do we see a way forward with this line of thinking in our region?

-The law rules when it comes to water. However, Fleck proposes certain potential scenarios would, "violate the public's sense of rightness." For the Colorado River basin, this could mean drying up Las Vegas. Do we see anything on the horizon that might act as an agent of change to create a new way of managing our watersheds, especially in times of draught?