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EDITOR'S DESK

FROM DAMS TO BEANS

The Milagro Beanfield War by John Treadwell Nichols and later a movie directed by Robert Redford is a humorous look at a fictional little town in New Mexico. The main character (Joe Mondragon), a lifelong no good, trouble-making resident of Milagro, starts the "war" by irrigating his father's old beanfield against the wishes of the rich developer and water rights owner. For some people currently living in the United States, this scenario is no longer a laughing matter.

Water rights are becoming more and more of an issue all over the United States. In Nevada, California and Washington water rights rules are changing.

Over sixty-five years ago, Hoover Dam's completion transformed the wild, flood-prone Colorado River into a series of dams and reservoirs serving 26 million people. Complex federal regulations, laws and interstate deals determined how farm fields and cities could use the river's waters.

A new set of rules was passed in January by the seven California River basin states (California, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Nevada) and approved by the former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. The "interim surplus criteria" arrangement guarantees Southern California, Southern Nevada and Arizona 15 years of extra supplies from Lake Mead. In exchange, the states will implement programs included in the plan that help it reduce its dependence on the Colorado River over that time. Essentially, this deal just buys time for the states and sets up water conservation projects, transfers and exchanges. Of course, these are growing population areas and 15 years from now even more water will be required.

Earlier this year in drought-ravaged Washington, some 300 Eastern

Washington farmers almost had to turn off their pumps. These so-called "junior water right holders" were on the list to give up water

for weeks or the entire growing season. Only the State's Department of Ecology's decision to reduce minimum flow requirements for the Columbia River kept the water flowing. In the drought of 1977 these same farmers were not as fortunate as the pumps were shut off, killing crops and livestock.

Interstate water rights quarrels are not only concerns for the arid west. The Supreme Court must referee a Kansas claim that Nebraska has violated a 1943 agreement by diverting the Republican River into thousands of wells to irrigate the Nebraska crops. In addition, Georgia, Alabama and Florida have a contract to share the resources of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint basin. However, the states cannot agree how to implement it. The water demands of growing urban cities such as Atlanta are increasing. As a result, Florida is worrying the water will be severely depleted by the time it reaches the oyster beds at its mouth.

These issues are not going to go away. The emergence of water markets and the electronic trading of water rights suggests major changes are in store for the water industry. Like the book, more compromises need to be made and everyone will be affected.

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