

Wise to plan for drier West

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<http://www.thestarphoenix.com/technology/Wise+plan+drier+West/11245400/story.html>

After a run of several wet years that saw several major flood emergencies, the spring and summer of 2015 have seen Saskatchewan literally dry up.

The signs have been everywhere - evacuees fleeing huge wildfires in northern forests, parched and stunted crops in the grain belt, and brown, patchy lawns and "green spaces" in the cities.

Reginans were asked to temporarily reduce their water use by 25 per cent a few weeks ago when the Buffalo Pound water treatment plant struggled with unusual algae blooms and water conditions on the lake that supplies this city and Moose Jaw with clean water.

Saskatchewan isn't alone - drought conditions have also hit Alberta farmers and British Columbia is enduring recordbreaking heat and sparse rainfall that have resulted in more than 1,300 wildfires and led to significant water use restrictions in normally rainy Vancouver.

While westerners hope this is a one-off, and not the start of the kind of multi-year drought that Californians have endured, climate scientists have been warning for some time that global warming is increasing the risk of severe, prolonged drought in Western Canada.

This year, scientists have noted the unusually low water levels along the South Saskatchewan River, which is fed by melting snow in the Rockies. This river provides water, directly for Saskatoon and, through Buffalo Pound Lake, for Regina and Moose Jaw.

"For sure, this is something we can expect to see with increasing regularity," Howard Wheeler, director of the Global Institute for Water Security at the University of Saskatchewan recently warned.

John Pomery, the Canada Research Chair in Water Resources and Climate Change, and director of the Centre for Hydrology at the U of S, points out that our province is at the mercy of a continent-wide weather system that stretches from Mexico to the Arctic Circle and from B.C. to Manitoba, and is responsible for the worst drought in California's history.

That drought is tied to climate change, he noted, and if the dry weather carries on to next winter and next spring, then we will have much more serious water problems.

Just last week, B.C. Premier Christy Clark said climate change was drying out her province and making it more vulnerable to wildfires - a "new normal" that will have to be addressed through climate policies and fire preparedness.

If this dry spell truly is a sign of things to come across the West, those who use the most water - the 70 per cent of Saskatchewan people now classified as "urban" living in major cities and towns - had better start adjusting their water consumption.

The City of Regina and City of Saskatoon have a number of excellent suggestions on their websites. For example, waterhungry lawns can be replaced with natural xeriscaping, as in Nevada and Arizona and, more recently, California.

Water use can also be reduced through the use of low-flow shower heads and toilets. Washing machines and dishwashers that use much less water are also available.

Developing a frugal attitude toward water now will help prepare us for a future in which this resource will become increasingly scarce and precious.