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Could water be Illinois' ace-in-the-hole?

By Jim Nowlan

As many readers wring their hands over an apparently bleak future for Illinois, we may have a long-term ace-in-the-hole—water. We would be wise to manage our great water resources well, while much of the rest of the U.S. dries up.

Over the past three decades, Illinois has hemorrhaged generally white, prosperous and well-educated population to the South and Southwest. But severe water shortage problems are developing there, certainly in the Southwest.

Water problems are worldwide, and I don't claim to be an expert, but the statistics are scary. According to the World Water Council, 1.1 billion people are currently without clean drinking water and another 2.6 billion lack adequate sanitation.

Population pressure is a big part of the problem. The world's population tripled in the 20th Century, but there isn't any more fresh water in the world than there was a million years ago. China annually uses 30 cubic kilometers more water each year than it is replacing, according to the informational website SixWise.com.

Alarm bells have been going off around the globe. Even movie heartthrob Matt Damon has started a serious and effective non-profit group aimed at increasing access to clean water for poor Africans, where the problems are probably most dire.

In the American Southwest, the water level at the great artificial reservoir at Lake Mead has been dropping since 1980 and is now near a level at which the federal government will start cutting the amounts of water going to Arizona and Nevada.

And predictive models of the consequences of global warming (which has been occurring—set aside for the moment whether any of this is human-induced) suggest further parching of the Southwest and West in the decades to come.

Water prices will undoubtedly rise rapidly in water short areas and restrictions on usage may become uncomfortable, even unacceptable. Maybe people and business will begin to trickle back to Illinois—if we are ready for them.

“We are still a water rich state. Come join us,” declares H. Allen Wehrmann, head of the center for groundwater science at the Prairie Research Institute at the University of Illinois. We have the Great Lakes, which accounts for 20 percent of the world’s fresh water, as well as rivers and aquifers with copious amounts of water.

In 2006, then-Gov. Blagojevich signed into being a statewide water planning program, and the scientists and engineers have projected water demand to 2050. Their work counts three million more people in the metropolitan area by 2050; nevertheless, the water supplies should be quite adequate if there is good planning and management.

Lake Michigan provides the drinking water for Chicago and many suburbs, though the amount of draw-down is limited by a U.S. Supreme Court decision from the 1960s. Nevertheless, the amount of Lake Michigan water allocated should be adequate to serve its customers until 2050, again so long as responsible conservation and planning measures are implemented.

The suburbs on the outer rim of metropolitan Chicago are not able to hook onto Lake Michigan water, so these generally growing suburbs worry about their water future. Even here, there should not be any major problems if there is planning for the future that

includes conservation as well as the development of additional surface water resources such as from the Fox and Kankakee Rivers.

Downstate has vast untapped water resources from surface water, think Mississippi and Illinois Rivers, among others, and from shallow sand and gravel aquifers.

Wars have been fought over water throughout history. The precious nature of water is obvious, except maybe to those of us who take our riches for granted.

At the least, the statewide water planning work should be funded into the future. As Wehrmann observes, “You can’t do good planning if you don’t know how much water you’re using now.”