

# **UNQUENCHABLE: AMERICA'S WATER CRISIS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

**Robert Glennon**

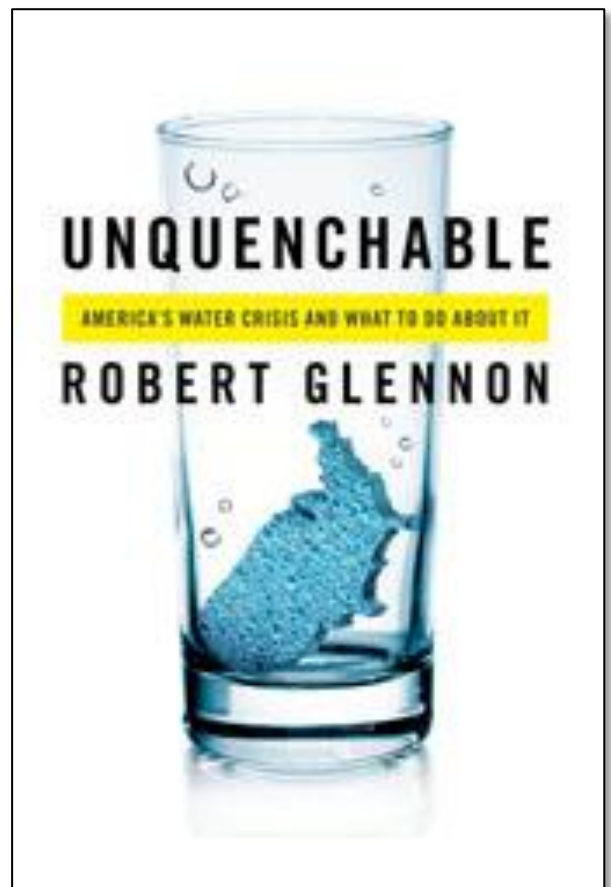
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"When the well's dry, we know the worth of water," observed Benjamin Franklin in 1774. But he was wrong. In the United States, we utterly fail to appreciate the value of water, even as we are running out. We Americans are spoiled. When we turn on the tap, out comes a limitless quantity of high-quality water for less money than we pay for our cell phone service or cable television. But as we'll see, what is happening in Vegas is not staying in Vegas. It's becoming a national epidemic.

Ignorance is bliss when it comes to water. In almost every state in the country, a landowner can drill a domestic well anywhere, anytime-no questions asked. Many states don't even require permits for commercial wells unless the pumping will exceed 100,000 gallons a day (that's 36 million gallons annually). For each well. We know so little about this pumping that the federal government cannot even estimate the total number of these wells across the country. In many agricultural regions where the government does know the number of wells, such as California's Central Valley, it is still clueless as to how much water farmers pump out of those wells, because they're unmetered.

Water is a valuable, exhaustible resource, but as Las Vegas did until just a few years ago, we treat it as valueless and inexhaustible. Just as the energy crisis brought to the nation's consciousness an acute awareness of energy consumption, global warming, and carbon footprints, so too the impending national water crisis will inspire us to rethink how and why we use water.

My aim in this book is to explore the crisis and to stimulate that rethinking. Part of the problem is that water shortages in many parts of the country, lacking the exhibitionist tendencies of Las Vegas, are often hidden. This book will illustrate the true dimensions of the crisis and offer solutions to it. Alas, the dimensions are immense.



Water lubricates the American economy just as oil does. It is intimately linked to energy because it takes water to make energy, and it takes energy to divert, pump, move, and cleanse water. Water plays a critical role in virtually every segment of the economy, from heavy industry to food production, from making semiconductors to providing Internet service. A prosperous future depends on a secure and reliable water supply. And we don't have it. To be sure, water still flows from taps, but we're draining our reserves like gamblers at the craps table.

We tend to look at Las Vegas and think it's a unique case, perhaps a cautionary tale but barely relevant to where the rest of us live. But the truth is, when it comes to water, Vegas offers us a glimpse of our own future. The evidence is everywhere-though if it is noticed, it is forgotten with the next drenching rain. Consider the following events that have occurred since 2007:

- Colorado farmers watched their crops wither because of a lack of irrigation water.
- Atlanta, Georgia, came within three months of running out, so it banned watering lawns, washing cars, and filling swimming pools.
- Orme, Tennessee, did run out and was forced to truck water in from Alabama.
- Scientists at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography predicted that Lake Mead, which supplies water to Los Angeles and Phoenix, could dry up by 2021.
- Hundreds of workers lost their jobs at Bowater, a South Carolina paper company, because low river flows prevented the plant from discharging its wastewater.
- Lack of adequate water prompted the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to rebuff Southern Nuclear Operating Company's request to build two new reactors in Georgia.
- Water shortages caused California farmers to cut the tops off hundreds of healthy, mature avocado trees in a desperate attempt to keep them alive.
- Lake Superior, the earth's largest freshwater body, was too shallow to float fully loaded cargo ships.
- Decimated salmon runs prompted cancellation of the commercial fishing season off the coasts of California and Oregon.
- A lack of adequate water led regulators in Idaho, Arizona, and Montana to deny permits for new coal-fired power plants.
- In Riverside County, California, water shortages forced a water district to put on hold seven proposed commercial and residential developments.

More information can be found at:

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[www.rglennon.com](http://www.rglennon.com)

[www.IslandPress.org/unquenchable](http://www.IslandPress.org/unquenchable)

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-july-16-2009/robert-glennon>

[http://www.indiewire.com/article/2011/09/21/ato\\_pictures\\_nabs\\_environmental\\_doc\\_last\\_california\\_at\\_the\\_oasis](http://www.indiewire.com/article/2011/09/21/ato_pictures_nabs_environmental_doc_last_california_at_the_oasis)

**Editor's Note:** Professor Robert Glennon was invited to give an oral presentation to the 2012 FLRC Workshop and a written manuscript was not solicited. You are invited to source further information from the links provided.