

In Tennessee, There's Water Everywhere, Really? Ask TN H2O - The Daily Times

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"Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters."

— Norman Maclean, "A River Runs Through It"

Noted author Maclean, who died in 1990 at the age of 87, may have captured something more than he realized when he hit upon river as metaphor. Not referencing the lyrical, insightful thrust of the first paragraph of the quote, not that part. The last sentence, "I am haunted by waters." That's the essence.

While the world has been obsessed with oil as the fluid that lubricates economies — liquid gold it's called — a broader perspective would put that notion to rest. Consider the course of human history, then look ahead to the future. Everywhere, you'll find water at the crux, especially if there is not enough to drink or grow crops.

In 2016, the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence ranked water scarcity as second only to terrorism as the greatest threat to our national security. The aging infrastructure was tapped as the major concern. Worsening droughts was another.

If nothing else, many places in America will have to face the end of inexpensive water. It's not complicated. The oldest economic principle in the book lays it out in three words: supply and demand.

It would be easy for Tennesseans, with our rivers and reservoirs, to presume our state is immune to such circumstance. Bill Haslam doesn't think so, and the governor is right.

In January, to not much acclaim, he appointed a steering committee of leaders from federal, state and local governments, industry, academia, environmental advocacy groups and public utilities to develop a statewide plan for future water availability in Tennessee.

The plan is called TN H2O. The initiative will include an assessment of current water resources and recommendations to help ensure Tennessee has an abundance of water to support future population and economic growth. The steering committee will submit a draft of TN H2O to the governor and will make it available for public input by October.

You're probably thinking, nothing wrong with that, but what's the point? Maybe not much of one, not unless you think Tennessee's manufacturing, agriculture, energy and tourism efforts can do without an abundant supply of water.

Go ahead, go the kitchen, turn on the tap, fill a glass with crystal clarity that never fails to quench your thirst. Take it for granted.

Haslam notes that abundant, clean water has been a strategic advantage for Tennessee and is critical to our quality of life. It is a natural resource that has to be managed appropriately for the state to continue to grow and prosper. The governor is right.

Tennessee's population is estimated to double in the next 50 years. This growth, along with recent concerns over the utilization of the Memphis Sands Aquifer, droughts that have impacted numerous Tennessee communities, failures of aging drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, and interstate battles over water rights, all stress the need to develop a statewide plan for addressing water availability.

Imagine you're living in Flint, Mich. You're handing a glass of tap water to your child to drink. You're wondering if you're being a terrible parent, trusting the government again. Wondering if it's so pure and safe, why is it tinted? Why does it have an odor?

TN H2O will pay particular attention to surface and groundwater, water and wastewater infrastructure, water reuse and land conservation, as well as institutional and legal framework. Working groups composed of subject matter experts will conduct the research and gather information. The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation will oversee the development of TN H2O.

It's not a moment too soon to ensure Tennessee is guaranteed an abundant and quality supply of water. You may not see it now, looking through that clear glass, but time is running out. Drip, drip, drip.