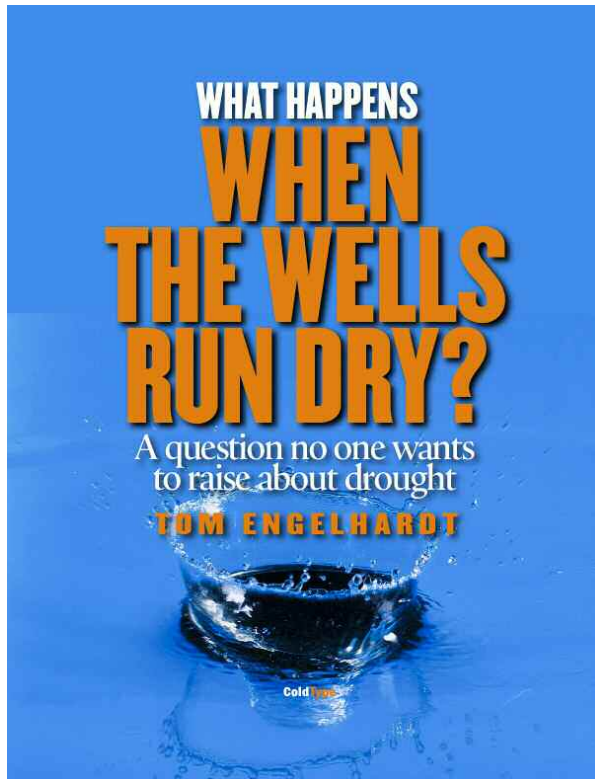


**WHAT HAPPENS  
WHEN  
THE WELLS  
RUN DRY?**

A question no one wants  
to raise about drought

**TOM ENGELHARDT**

ColdType



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# G

Georgia's on my mind. Atlanta, Georgia. It's a city in trouble in a state in trouble in a region in trouble. Water trouble. Trouble big enough that the state government's moving fast. Just a few weeks ago, backed up by a choir singing "Amazing Grace," accompanied by three protestant ministers, and 20 demonstrators from the Atlanta Freethought Society, Georgia's Baptist Governor Sonny Perdue led a crowd of hundreds in prayers for rain. "We've come together here," he said, "simply for one reason and one reason only: To very reverently and respectfully pray up a storm." It seems, however, that the Almighty -- He "who can and will make a difference" -- was otherwise occupied and the regional drought continued to threaten Atlanta, a metropolis of 5 million people (and growing fast), with the possibility that it might run out of water in as little as 80 days or as much as a year, if the rains don't come.

Here's a little summary of the situation today:

Water rationing has hit the capital. Car washing and lawn watering are prohibited within city limits. Harvests in the region have dropped by 15-30%. By the end of summer, local reservoirs and dams were holding 5% of their capacity.

Oops, that's not Atlanta, or even the southeastern U.S. That's Ankara, Turkey, hit by a fierce drought and high temperatures that also have had southern and southwestern Europe in their grip.

Sorry, let's try that again. Imagine this scenario:

Over the last decade, 15-20% decreases in precipitation have been recorded. These water losses have been accompanied by record temperatures and increasing wildfires in areas where populations have been growing rapidly. A fierce drought has settled in -- of the hun-

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dred-year variety. Lawns can be watered but just for a few hours a day (and only by bucket); four-minute showers are the max allowed. Car washes are gone, though you can clean absolutely essential car windows and mirrors by hand.

Sound familiar? As it happens, that's not the American southeast either; that's a description of what's come to be called "The Big Dry" -- the unprecedented drought that has swept huge parts of Australia, the worst in at least a century on an already notoriously dry continent, but also part of the world's breadbasket, where crops are now failing regularly and farms closing down.

In fact, on my way along the parched path toward Atlanta, Georgia, I found myself taking any number of drought-stricken detours. There's Moldova. (If you're like me, odds are you don't even know where that small, former Soviet republic falls on a map.) Like much of southern Europe, it experienced baking temperatures this summer, exceptionally low precipitation, sometimes far less than 50% of expected rainfall, failing crops and farms, and spreading wildfires. (The same was true, to one degree or another, of Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, and -- with its 100-year record scorching of Biblical proportions -- Greece which lost 10% of its forest cover in a month-long fiery apocalypse, leaving "large tracts of countryside.... at risk of depopulation.")

Or how about Morocco, across the Mediterranean, which experienced 50% less rainfall than normal? Or the Canary Islands, those Spanish vacation spots in the Atlantic Ocean known to millions of visitors for their year-around mild climate which, this summer, morphed into 104 degree days, strong winds, and fierce wildfires. Eighty-six thousand acres were burnt to a crisp, engulfing some of the islands in flames and smoke that drove out thousands of tourists?

Or what about Mexico's Tehuacán Valley, where, thousands of years ago, corn was first domesticated as an agricultural crop. Even today, asking for "un Tehuacán" in a restaurant in Mexico still means getting the best bottled mineral water in the country. Unfortunately, the area hasn't had a good rain since 2003, and the ensuing drought conditions have made subsistence farming next to impossible, sending desperate locals northwards and across the border as illegal immigrants -- some into southern California, itself just swept by monstrous Santa Ana-driven wildfires, fanned by prolonged drought conditions and fed tinder by new communities built deep into the wild lands where the fires gestate. And Tehuacán is but one disaster zone in a growing Mexican catastrophe. As Mike Davis has written, "Abandoned ranchitos and near-ghost towns throughout Coahuila, Chihuahua and Sonora testify to the relentless succession of dry years -- beginning in the 1980s but assuming truly catastrophic intensity in the late 1990s -- that has pushed hundreds of thousands of poor rural people toward the sweatshops of Ciudad Juárez and the barrios of Los Angeles."

According to the How Dry I Am Chart of "livability expert" Bert Sperling, four cities in

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Southern California, not parched Atlanta, top the national drought ratings: Los Angeles, San Diego, Oxnard, and Riverside. In addition, Pasadena has had the dubious honor, through September, of experiencing its driest year in history.

### **RESOURCE WARS IN THE HOMELAND**

"Resource wars" are things that happen elsewhere. We don't usually think of our country as water poor or imagine that "resource wars" might be applied as a description to various state and local governments in the southwest, southeast, or upper Midwest now fighting tooth and nail for previously shared water. And yet, "war" may not be a bad metaphor for what's on the horizon. According to the National Climate Data Center, federal officials have declared 43% of the contiguous U.S. to be in "moderate to extreme drought." Already, Sonny Perdue of Georgia is embroiled in an ever more bitter conflict -- a "water war," as the headlines say -- with the governors of Florida and Alabama, as well as the Army Corps of Engineers, over the flow of water into and out of the Atlanta area.

He's hardly alone. After all, the Southwest is in the grips of what, according to Davis, some climatologists are terming a "'mega-drought,' even the 'worst in 500 years.'" More shockingly, he writes, such conditions may actually represent the region's new "normal weather." The upper Midwest is also in rainfall-shortage mode, with water levels at all the Great Lakes dropping unnervingly. The water level of Lake Superior, for instance, has fallen to the "lowest point on record for this time of year." (Notice, by the way, how many "records" are being set nationally and globally in these drought years; how many places are already beginning to push beyond history, which means beyond any reference point we have.)

And then there's the southeast, 26% of which, according to the National Weather Service, is in a state of "exceptional" drought, its most extreme category, and 78% of which is "drought-affected." We're talking here about a region normally considered rich in water resources setting a bevy of records for dryness. It has been the driest year on record for North Carolina and Tennessee, for instance, while 18 months of blue skies have led Georgia to break every historical record, whether measured by "the percentage of moisture in the soil, the flow rate of rivers, [or] inches of rain."

Atlanta is hardly the only city or town in the region with a dwindling water supply. According to David Bracken of Raleigh's News & Observer, "17 North Carolina water systems, including Raleigh and Durham, have 100 or fewer days of water supply remaining before they reach the dregs." Rock Spring, South Carolina, "has been without water for a month. Farmers are hauling water by pickup truck to keep their cattle alive." The same is true for the tiny town of Orme, Tennessee, where the mayor turns on the water for only three hours a day.

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And then, there's Atlanta, its metropolitan area "watered" mainly by a 1950s man-made reservoir, Lake Lanier, which, in dramatic photos, is turning into baked mud. Already with a population of five million and known for its uncontrolled growth (as well as lack of water planning), the city is expected to house another two million inhabitants by 2030. And yet, depending on which article you read, Atlanta will essentially run out of water by New Year's eve, in 80 days, in 120 days, or, according to the Army Corps of Engineers -- which seems to find this reassuring -- in 375 days, if the drought continues (as it may well do).

Okay, so let's try again:

Across the region, fountains sit "bone dry"; in small towns, "full-soak" baptisms have been stopped; car washes and laundromats are cutting hours or shutting down. Golf courses have resorted to watering only tees and greens. Campfires, stoves, and grills are banned in some national parks. The boats have left Lake Lanier and the metal detectors have arrived.

This is the verdant southeastern United States, which, thanks in part to a developing La Nina effect in the Pacific Ocean, now faces the likelihood of a drier than ever winter. And, to put this in context, keep in mind that 2007 "to date has been the warmest on record for land [and]... the seventh warmest year so far over the oceans, working out to the fourth warmest overall worldwide." Oh, and up in the Arctic sea, the ice pack reached its lowest level this September since satellite measurements were begun in 1979.

### **AND THEN?**

And then, there's that question which has been nagging at me ever since this story first caught my attention in early October as it headed out of the regional press and slowly made its way toward the top of the nightly TV news and the front-pages of national newspapers; it's the question I've been waiting patiently for some environmental reporter(s) somewhere in the mainstream media to address; the question that seems to me so obvious I find it hard to believe everyone isn't thinking about it; the one you would automatically want to have answered -- or at least gnawed on by thoughtful, expert reporters and knowledgeable pundits. Every day for the last month or more I've waited, as each piece on Atlanta ends at more or less the same point -- with the dire possibility that the city's water will soon be gone -- as though hitting a brick wall.

Not that there hasn't been some fine reportage -- on the extremity of the situation, the overbuilding and overpopulating of the metropolitan region, the utter heedlessness that went with it, and the resource wars that have since engulfed it. Still, I've Googled around, read scores of pieces on the subject, and they all -- even the one whose first paragraph asked, "What if Atlanta's faucets really do go dry?" -- seem to end just where my question begins.

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It's as if, in each piece, the reporter had reached the edge of some precipice down which no one cares to look, lest we all go over.

Based on the record of the last seven years, we can take it for granted that the Bush administration hasn't the slightest desire to glance down; that no one in FEMA who matters has given the situation the thought it deserves; and that, on this subject, as on so many others, top administration officials are just hoping to make it to January 2009 without too many more scar marks. But, if not the federal government, shouldn't somebody be asking? Shouldn't somebody check out what's actually down there?

So let me ask it this way: And then?

And then what exactly can we expect? If the southeastern drought is already off the charts in Georgia, then, whether it's 80 days or 800 days, isn't there a possibility that Atlanta may one day in the not-so-distant future be without water? And what then?

Okay, they're trucking water into waterless Orme, Tennessee, but the town's mayor, Tony Reames, put the matter well, worrying about Atlanta. "We can survive. We're 145 people but you've got 4.5 million there. What are they going to do?"

What indeed? Has water ever been trucked in to so many people before? And what about industry including, in the case of Atlanta, Coca Cola, which is, after all, a business based on water? What about restaurants that need to wash their plates or doctors in hospitals who need to wash their hands?

Let's face it, with water, you're down to the basics. And if, as some say, we've passed the point not of "peak oil," but of "peak water" (and cheap water) on significant parts of the planet... well, what then?

I mean, I'm hardly an expert on this, but what exactly are we talking about here? Someday in the reasonably near future could Atlanta, or Phoenix, which in winter 2005-2006, went 143 days without a bit of rain, or Las Vegas become a Katrina minus the storm? Are we talking here about a new trail of tears? What exactly would happen to the poor of Atlanta? To Atlanta itself?

Certainly, you've seen the articles about what global warming might do in the future to fragile or low-lying areas of the world. Such pieces usually mention the possibility of enormous migrations of the poor and desperate. But we don't usually think about that in the "homeland." Maybe we should.

Or maybe, for all I know, if the drought continues, parts of the region will burn to a frizzle first, à la parts of southern California, before they can even experience the complete loss of water? Will we have hundred-year fire records in the South, without a Santa Ana wind in sight? And what then?

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### **MASS MIGRATIONS?**

Okay, excuse a terrible, even tasteless, sports analogy, but think of this as a major bowl game, and they've sent one of the water boys -- me -- to man the press booth. I mean, please. Why am I the one asking this? Where's the media's first team?

In my own admittedly limited search of the mainstream, I found only one vivid, thoughtful recent piece on this subject: "The Future Is Drying Up," by Jon Gertner, written for the New York Times Magazine. It focused on the southwestern drought and began to explore some of the "and thens," as in this brief passage on Colorado in which Gertner quotes Roger Pulwarty, a "highly regarded climatologist" at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration:

"The worst outcome.... would be mass migrations out of the region, along with bitter interstate court battles over the dwindling water supplies. But well before that, if too much water is siphoned from agriculture, farm towns and ranch towns will wither. Meanwhile, Colorado's largest industry, tourism, might collapse if river flows became a trickle during summertime."

Mass migrations, exfiltrations.... Stop a sec and take in that possibility and what exactly it might mean. After all, we do have some small idea, having, in recent years, lost one American city, New Orleans, at least temporarily.

Or consider another "and then" prediction: What if the prolonged drought in the southwest turns out, as Mike Davis wrote in the Nation magazine, to be "on the scale of the medieval catastrophes that contributed to the notorious collapse of the complex Anasazi societies at Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde during the twelfth century"?

What if, indeed.

I'm not simply being apocalyptic here. I'm just asking. It's not even that I expect answers. I'd just like to see a crew of folks with the necessary skills explore the "and then" question for the rest of us. Try to connect a few dots, or tell us if they don't connect, or just explain where the dots really are.

### **AS THE WORLD BURNS**

Okay, since I'm griping on the subject, let me toss in another complaint. As this piece has indicated, the southeastern drought, unlike the famed cheese of childhood song, does not exactly stand alone. Such conditions, often involving record or near record temperatures, and record or near record wildfires, can be observed at numerous places across the planet. So why is it that, except at relatively obscure websites, you can hardly find a mainstream



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piece that mentions more than one drought at a time?

An honorable exception would be a recent Seattle Times column by Neal Peirce that brought together the southwestern and southeastern droughts, as well as the Western "flame zone," where "mega-fires" are increasingly the norm, in the context of global warming, in order to consider our seemingly willful "myopia about the future."

But you'd be hard-pressed to find many pieces in our major newspapers (or on the TV news) that put all (or even a number) of the extreme drought spots on the global map together in order to ask a simple question (even if its answer may prove complex indeed): Do they have anything in common? And if so, what? And if so, what then?

To find even tentative answers to such questions you have to leave the mainstream. Amy Goodman of Democracy Now!, for example, interviewed paleontologist and author of *The Weather Makers: The History and Future Impact of Climate Change*, Tim Flannery recently on the topic of a "world on fire." Flannery offered the following observation:

"It's not just the Southeast of the United States. Europe has had its great droughts and water shortages. Australia is in the grip of a drought that's almost unbelievable in its ferocity. Again, this is a global picture. We're just getting much less usable water than we did a decade or two or three decades ago. It's a sort of thing again that the climate models are predicting. In terms of the floods, again we see the same thing. You know, a warmer atmosphere is just a more energetic atmosphere. So if you ask me about a single flood event or a single fire event, it's really hard to make the connection, but take the bigger picture and you can see very clearly what's happening."

I know answers to the "and then" question are not easy or necessarily simple. But if drought -- or call it "desertification" -- becomes more widespread, more common in heavily populated parts of the globe already bursting at the seams (and with more people arriving daily), if whole regions no longer have the necessary water, how many trails of tears, how many of those mass migrations or civilizational collapses are possible? How much burning and suffering and misery are we likely to experience? And what then?

These are questions I can't answer; that the Bush administration is guaranteed to be desperately unwilling and unprepared to face; and that, as yet, the media has largely refused to consider in a serious way. And if the media can't face this and begin to connect some dots, why shouldn't Americans be in denial, too?

It's not that no one is thinking about, or doing work on, drought. I know that scientists have been asking the "and then" questions (or perhaps far more relevant ones that I can't even formulate); that somewhere people have been exploring, studying, writing about them. But how am I to find out?

Of course, all of us can wander the Internet; we can visit the National Oceanic and

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Atmospheric Administration, which has just set up a new website to help encourage drought coverage; we can drop in at blogs like [RealClimate.org](http://RealClimate.org) and [ClimateProgress.org](http://ClimateProgress.org), which make a habit of keeping up with, or ahead of, such stories; or even, for instance, the Georgia Drought website of the University of Georgia's College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences; or we can keep an eye on a new organization of journalists (well covered recently on the NPR show "On the Media"), Circle of Blue, who are planning to concentrate on water issues. But, believe me, even when you get to some of these sites, you may find yourself in an unknown landscape with no obvious water holes in view and no guides to lead you there.

In the meantime, there may be no trail of tears out of Atlanta; there may even be rain in the city's near future for all any of us know; but it's clear enough that, globally and possibly nationally, tragedy awaits. It's time to call in the first team to ask some questions.

Honestly, I don't demand answers. Just a little investigation, some thought, and a glimpse or two over that precipice as the world turns.... and bakes and burns.



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