

Worldwide News Stories Report Droughts Trigger Water Banking Initiatives

The Global Water News Watch Web site, produced by the Center for Sustainability of semi-Arid Hydrology and Riparian Areas, distributes summaries of Web-based, water-related news and scientific reports from 140 countries in seven languages around the world. During the last two years, more than 160 articles have chronicled worldwide attempts to privatize and market water. But since early 2003, numerous articles have described growing resistance to this trend. Increasingly, questions are being raised about ecological concerns and whether privatization is fulfilling its promises of improved infrastructure and affordable water.



Protesters at the Third World Water Forum, Kyoto, Japan.
Photo by Juan Valdés.

An exception to the general backlash against market mechanisms to reallocate water is a spate of stories regarding efforts to establish water banks in drought-stricken areas. Severe and prolonged droughts stretching from the western U.S. and northern Mexico to Australia and southern Europe have created water crises requiring immediate responses. Often, the responses take the form of temporary transfers of water from agriculture to urban, in-stream, and even recreational uses. Water banks are underground or off-stream storage, or accounting mechanisms that allow surplus water to be transferred to other users or saved for later use.

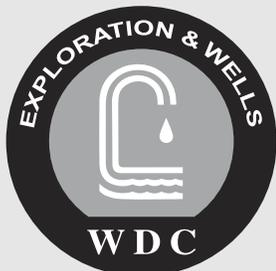
In some locations, governments have reallocated water and later compensated farmers. But more often, water banks are considered more equitable than forced reallocations and better at providing incentives to conserve or eliminate marginal uses of water. Water banks can be established quickly, and can even function in basins where water rights have not been fully adjudicated.

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In Australia, hit hard by recurring El Niño-related droughts, a number of water banking mechanisms and proposals have been recently set forth. A commonly reported theme of water banking-related discussions throughout Australia, Arizona, and South Africa is development of aquifer storage for banked water. One alternative to water banking occurred in Italy, where communities donated water to their neighbors impacted by drought.

While the news articles indicate that water banking is more acceptable than some other forms of water marketing, it nevertheless has its skeptics. Concerns include impacts of out-of-catchment transfers of water, profiteering, and whether non-land owners should be allowed to participate.



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