



The Nestlé water bottling plant in Hope, British Columbia draws large amounts of water from the Coquihalla River, which connects to the Kawkawa watershed. The Coquihalla River also connects to the Fraser River. Both rivers are experiencing extremely low water levels this year.

## High and Dry: Corporate **water takings** **permitted** during droughts



by Emma Lui

The daily news is starting to read more like recent Hollywood sci-fi movies that depict a world without water.

California's drought is being increasingly compared to *Mad Max: Fury Road*, a film that takes place in a drought-stricken future where those who control water control the people. And a look at what's happening globally shows the scenario is becoming frighteningly real.

All around the world, communities are facing historic levels of drought. The California government called for a mandatory 25 per cent reduction following NASA scientist Jay Famiglietti's announcement that the U.S. state has only enough water to last one year. Communities have been outraged that Nestlé, as well as fracking and big agricultural companies, continue to draw water at massive rates. People in Taiwan, whose water has been handed over to the global electronics industry,

are being asked to reduce their water use. At the beginning of August, 68 of the 96 regional departments in France were under drought restrictions. Residents of Sao Paulo, Brazil, have been experiencing intermittent access to water despite being the capital of one of the most water-rich countries in the world. The situation there has become increasingly distressing as news recently broke that the Brazilian army is preparing for riots.

Droughts affect not only the availability of drinking water, but also energy generation, food crops, and fisheries.

As wildfires rage, drought is spreading across British Columbia and in the traditional territories of Indigenous communities. Most of southern B.C. is being categorized under “Drought Level 4,” which indicates it is extremely dry and is experiencing the highest level of drought. In these regions, all commercial use of water and residential outdoor tap use is prohibited. Fishing has been banned in most of the lakes in southern B.C. and farmers are being asked to restrict water-takings from rivers and their tributaries throughout the summer.

In Alberta, the drought is affecting crops and the cattle industry. At least 17 counties have officially declared states of agricultural disaster.

There are 17,000 glaciers in British Columbia and research by UNBC shows they are all melting. Melting glaciers in both B.C. and Alberta will have an impact on all the communities in western and Prairie provinces where the glaciers provide water.

Ontario and Quebec have also experienced record levels of drought, although not as severe as the west. Still, there have been six major droughts in southern Ontario since 1998 and the first six months of 2012 had been the driest since 1958.

As of January 2015, there were 1,838 drinking water advisories in Canada. At any given time there are over 100 Indigenous communities under a drinking water advisory.

Despite the record levels of drought and drinking water advisories, governments are still allowing projects that threaten remaining water sources like large-scale bottled water withdrawals, fracking, industrial farming, mining and tar sands development.

Potential spills by tar sands pipelines like Northern Gateway and the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline pose a threat to the hundreds of lakes and rivers along their routes.

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Basin are being threatened by extreme energy projects such as tar sands and fracked gas pipelines and shipments.

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Quebec is under a fracking moratorium, but the Ontario government has promoted fracking in southern Ontario. Despite much of eastern Canada being under fracking moratoria, western and Prairie provinces are still moving forward with fracking projects that use massive amounts of water.

Farmers and landowners in Alberta have been raising concerns about water sources and the impacts of drought on cattle and crops.

Nestlé, a company that owns 70 per cent of bottled water brands worldwide, and other bottled water companies continue to draw water from community water sources in Ontario and British Columbia. Bottled water takings also occur in Quebec, the Prairies and the Atlantic.

Droughts are occurring in communities where the local economies are agriculture-based and reliant on a steady source of clean water. The agriculture industry generates \$11 billion in revenue in British Columbia and \$10 billion in Alberta, and creates nearly 1 million jobs in the farming sector in Ontario.

These droughts signal the need to revamp the way water is managed, governed and allocated. Both Alberta and British Columbia allocate water based on a “first in time, first in right” (FITFIR) system that prioritizes water permits by the date they are issued. In other words, if fracking, mining or bottled water companies like Nestlé have older permits than municipalities, small-scale farmers or other community water users, we could see scenarios where the companies’ permits are honoured while community users are told they cannot draw water.

The global water crisis is here and many communities are facing a new reality – one that includes uncertainty in water availability. Council of Canadians National Chairperson Maude Barlow, who long has done extensive research and warned that the world was running out of water, has called for a new water ethic and for water to be put at the centre of all policy.

Governments are reluctant to make hard decisions, like stopping fracking, tar sands expansion and bottled water withdrawals. Yet these are the kinds of choices governments must make to ensure a clean water supply not only for the coming years, but for future generations.

More importantly, individuals and communities must become more knowledgeable about water. We must change our relationship with water and engage in decisions affecting water. We must understand that while we have a right to water, we also have a responsibility to protect it. We live in a time when governments are prioritizing corporate interests over the protection of water. We are faced with the challenge of protecting water ourselves. To do this we must reach out to neighbours, community residents, and environmentalists, as well as our union and indigenous allies, and take up this challenge.

Our water will dry up if we don’t.

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