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A land drying out

THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JUNE 3, 2010

While other countries are thirsting for fresh water, Canada is a nation abundant in lakes and rivers, right? Maybe not.

Western Canada has barely emerged from a multi-year drought, and this year again conditions range from "bone dry" in western Alberta's foothills to "extraordinarily dry" in the Rockies.

And that, says a leading Canadian hydrologist, is just a taste of the near future.

John Pomeroy of the University of Saskatchewan came to Ottawa last week to tell MPs that the nature of water throughout Alberta, Saskatchewan and parts of Manitoba is changing now, as the climate warms.

The region draws its main rivers from the Rockies, he explained. Rain and snow on the Prairies tend to stay where they fall, in ponds and wetlands. Big rivers like the Saskatchewan, which supply cities, towns and irrigation systems, come from mountain runoff.

This year he was "horrified" to find that in spring, scrubby trees near the treeline were exposed at a time when they should have been buried in snow.

And, while a warming climate will bring more precipitation to the Rockies, he warned MPs that in the long run the loss of water to evaporation and early spring runoff will make the mountains drier.

There are some things land managers can do. Cutting back the forest cover would actually protect some of the water, since snow that falls on the forest floor resists evaporation better than snow high up in spruce and pine branches.

Allowing more forest fires would help. And perversely, the mountain pine beetle, which eats pine forests, may help preserve western water.

But it won't be enough. The Prairies face a drier future, and the wetlands and ponds that support millions of ducks may become inherently unstable. Pomeroy warns that rivers will still run, but the land around them will be like a desert -- "not too much difference between the Saskatchewan (River) and the Nile crossing the Sahara."

There are lots of arguments these days over how best to prevent climate change, but the uncomfortable truth is that in some ways it's too late. Climate in the Rockies has already risen, and glaciers and the snow pack are already melting.

This is bad news for farmers, as the Prairies have no water to spare at the best of times. Even a slight drying trend will damage farming and limit the flow of water to cities and industry. Extracting oil from the tar sands uses a huge amount of water.

This disaster in the making teaches us that Canada must adapt to climate change, rather than putting all our chips on the faint hope that a magic technology will descend from the sky to prevent it.

We Ontarians assume that the whole country is like us, blessed with endless fresh water, but the story out west suggests otherwise.

Admittedly, some scientists believe that this might not be a recent, man-made phenomenon and

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Admittedly, some scientists believe that this might not be a recent, man-made phenomenon and that a more arid state is the norm on the prairies. Yet -- whatever the details -- we need to adapt to less water in western Canada, even as the population and industry grow.

To begin, we need to do a better job of protecting the reservoirs of the Rockies. Anything less is closing our eyes and hoping problems just go away.

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