

The West's New Boomtowns Are Looking Beyond the Drought
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AURORA, Colo., Feb. 2 - Peter D. Binney used to look out his window and wonder, as drought settled over the West, what the heck happened.

Now, as snow has finally fallen heavy and deep in the mountains this winter, his worries have shifted direction like the wind. As the director of utilities in this suburban city on the prairie east of Denver, Mr. Binney now fears people will think that the drought is over and that it is back to business as usual.

"There's a natural tendency to wish crisis away, and it's difficult to maintain the discipline and conviction," he said. "It's something I wrestle with every day."

For cities like Aurora that were hard hit by the drought's worst years, the wet interregnum of this winter - which may or may not be the beginning of the drought's end, meteorologists say - is presenting its own peculiar season of anxiety.

From its highway medians, where artificial turf will soon be tested, to a revised building code that puts conservation law into backyards and municipal plumbing fixtures, this sprawling, low-rise city of 300,000 and many places like it seem to have been fundamentally transformed by drought in the last five years.

The city's golf courses are now watered by partly treated wastewater. Alternative gardening techniques, using low-water Xeriscape plants, have become a hit at Tagawa Garden Center and Florist, where the city held gardening classes during the drought and gave away low-flow plumbing fixtures.

Aurora extended its reach outside its borders, buying up water rights to thousands of acres of farmland and making itself a symbol of rising political clout, or municipal ruthlessness, depending on one's point of view.

"The drought gave us an awareness that we live in a semi-arid climate," said Beth Zwinak, Tagawa's manager. "This year might have enough snow, but it doesn't mean it's always going to be that way."

But many of the city's programs are only partly complete, and leaders like Mr. Binney fret that the natural human proclivity to slack off - wasting water on the lawn, neglecting that leaky faucet, postponing the hard political decisions to build more supply - could undo much of the rigor that drought imposed.

The Aurora City Council will not vote until this summer on the largest civic project in the city's history and the centerpiece of the long-term drought response: a \$350 million pipeline that would bring water sometime in the next decade from the South Platte River

north of Denver. And if the vote is postponed past next November's elections, a new Council that did not live through the drought's worst years, 2002 and 2003, will take over the issue. Water purchases in farm country, meanwhile, are slowing. Aurora signed an agreement last year, in the face of deep hostility from farm community leaders, that when its current round of water purchases is completed, it will buy no more farm water for at least 40 years.

For cities like Aurora - part of an archipelago of new urban centers across the West that have never experienced a serious drought until this one - the sense of political limits that came with a change in the weather pattern was as much of a shock as the drought itself.

Older cities like Denver and Phoenix grew up nurtured by a huge federal commitment in the 20th century to water the West through dams, reservoirs and irrigation projects. The new places found themselves largely dependent on their own resources, as federal ambitions have retreated and the environmental costs of the old ways have become clearer.

Old cities, especially here in the Denver area, were able to tap water from the snow-rich western slope of the Rocky Mountains. The new places are finding that way blocked. The tourism and recreation industry - an ever-more powerful force in the West - needs the water for rafting, fishing and aesthetics. And other fast-growing places like Grand Junction and Montrose in Colorado and Moab and St. George in Utah have grown thirsty themselves, and are loath to part with what they have.

"Aurora has been forced to innovate," said Melinda Kassen, the director of the Colorado Water Project for Trout Unlimited, a conservation group. "It's a mixed bag - we're not comfortable with everything they're doing, but they're also doing some things that are good and that we hope would be models."

The Murphy Creek School, under construction on Aurora's booming east side, will have low-flow plumbing fixtures, a computer-controlled watering system and Xeriscape plantings - all mandated by a new building code.

Environmentalists say Aurora has become a leader in helping farmers conserve water even in places where the city has become unpopular for its contracts that siphon water away. Aurora is building water-efficient drip-irrigation systems on 700 acres of farmland near the town of Rocky Ford, where it is buying irrigation water, and has received requests from farmers for another 200 acres. The farmers use less water under the new system, and Aurora gets to buy the surplus.

The city has also become a force in prairie land restoration. Under its water agreements, it has paid for the re-establishment of native grasses on more than 4,000 acres of farmland stripped of water rights. City parks built since the drought are skewed toward the same native grasses, which need less water. But the negative feelings about the city because of its agriculture purchases may have a legacy, environmentalists and local politicians say, even if the drought ends this year.

"People are very strongly opposed to communities like Aurora coming into our valley and taking water - and lots of places are thirsty," said Jane Rawlings, assistant to the publisher at The Pueblo Chieftain, a newspaper that has led a campaign against draining local farms and has often pointed to Aurora as its case study in villainy.

The state's top water regulator, Russell George, is pushing legislators to pass a bill that would regulate the process of moving water, prompted by Aurora and other cities buying up water rights, he said. "I don't believe we should be moving water away from the farms," said Mr. George, the executive director of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources. "But cities will go where the water is."

Mr. George said his legislative plan was modeled after the seven-state compact that divided up the waters of the Colorado River in 1922. The drought, he said, has focused the questions raised back then down to the river basins within the states: Who gets the water, and what are the rules about its transfer?

Some critics say they think the changes brought by the drought will be superficial because few cities - however ambitious their water projects - have addressed the underlying question of sustainability: What population level, or growth rate, is really practical in the West? Aurora, those critics say, continues to build with abandon, its leaders apparently confident that they can resolve water problems without rethinking the premise of growth. "Aurora policy makers, the people who decide about growth in Aurora, have chosen to plan and develop without worrying where the water is coming from," said Ms. Kassen at Trout Unlimited. "Some might say that's irresponsible; others would call it creative tension."