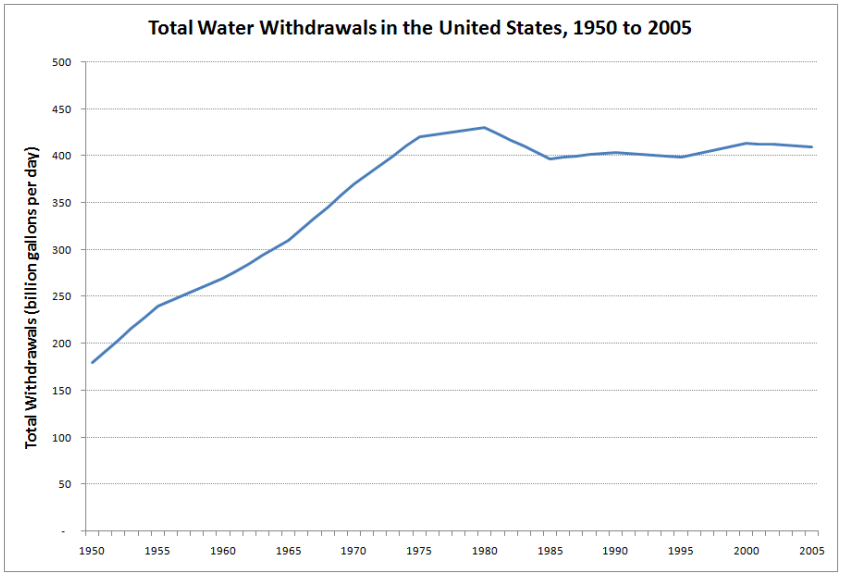
PACIFIC INSTITUTE

Fact Sheet on Water Use in the United States

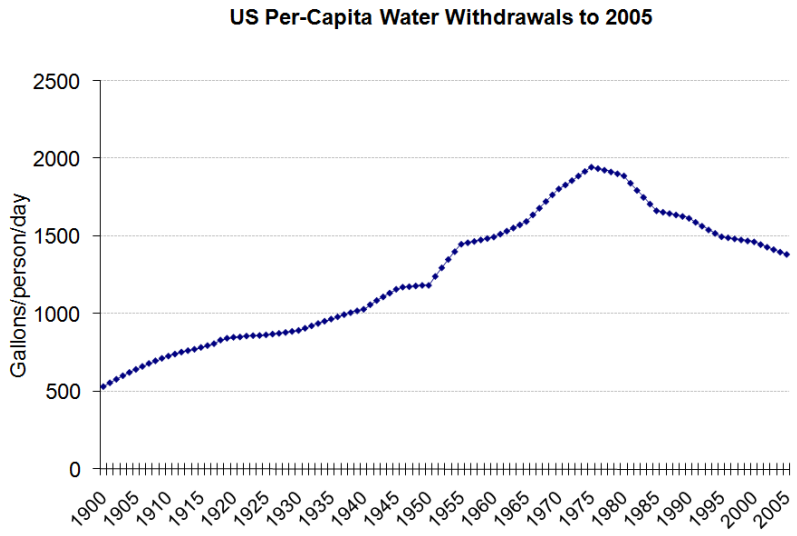
The United States continues to improve water-use efficiency.

New data from USGS shows both improvements and worrisome trends.

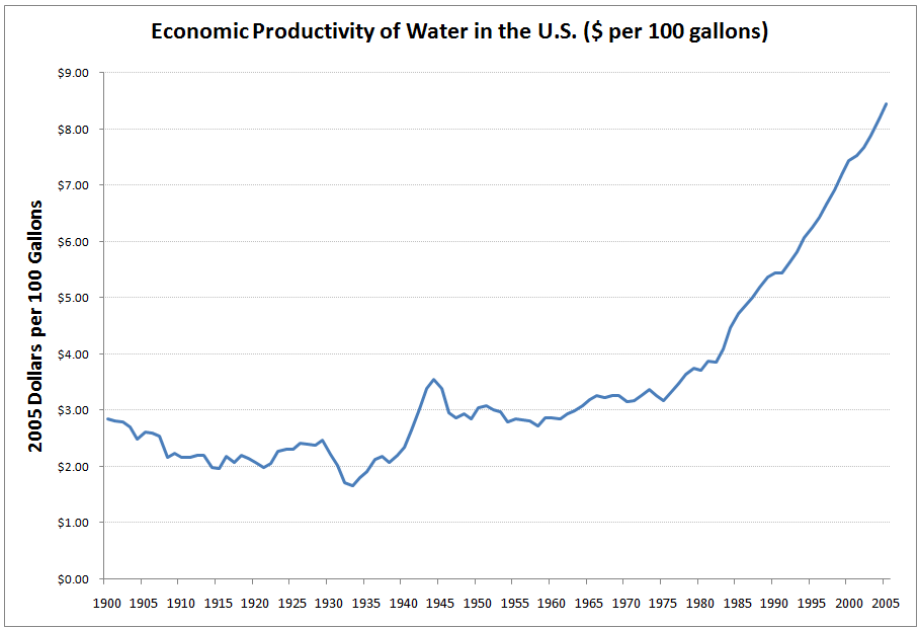
[Update October 28, 2009] Oakland, Calif. – New information from the U.S. Geological Survey shows that total water use in the United States in the five-year period ending in 2005 dropped slightly from 2000. Moreover, total water use, for all purposes, is now lower than it was in 1975. Figure 1 shows total U.S. water withdrawals from 1950 to 2005. Per-capita water use has dropped even more dramatically over the past three decades. At the same time, the economic productivity of water – measured as dollars of GDP produced with every hundred gallons of water used in the U.S. – continues to improve. But, according to a Pacific Institute analysis, there are some worrying trends.



According to the new figures, released every five years by the USGS, total water use in the U.S. decreased by one percent from 2000 to 2005 (the most recent year for which numbers are available), while the population of the country grew by 5%. The amount of water used per-person in the U.S. is lower now than it has been since the mid-1950s. And per-capita water use in the nation has dropped nearly 30% from its peak in 1975. Figure 2 shows per-capita water use from 1900 to 2005. Water use per person in the U.S. peaked in 1975 and has been declining since, as efficiency of water use has improved, especially in irrigation and industrial water use.



Water planners and managers always assume that as populations grow, and as economies grow, that water use will also grow. This is no longer true, as limits to water resources become more apparent and severe, and as improvements in technologies and management approaches permit efficiency of use to improve. Figure 3 shows the "economic productivity" of water use in the United States, as calculated by the Pacific Institute, from 1900 to 2005. This figure measures the dollars of gross domestic product (GDP) produced with every 100 gallons of water used. The U.S. now produces far more wealth, with far less water, than at any time in the past.



Not all the news about water is good: The United States, although relatively water-rich, faces a range of threats to its vital supplies of freshwater. Overuse has turned the Colorado River into little more than a trickle. Overuse and contamination threaten the massive Ogallala aquifer, which runs from Texas to South Dakota and is an important source of irrigation and drinking water. Political and economic conflicts are growing between Alabama, Florida, and Georgia over water use. And other serious threats to our water resources – including climate change, environmental destruction, and population growth – remain unaddressed.

Selected Data Facts from the Pacific Institute analysis of new USGS data:

- Total water use in the U.S. in 2005 is lower than it was in 1975.
- Per-capita water use in the U.S. in 2005 is lower than it has been since the mid-1950s.
- U.S. water use, per person, peaked in 1975 at 1,944 gallons per person per day and has now dropped to 1,383 g/p/d.
- Household water use is growing at the same rate as national population. Improvements in water-use efficiency in homes are being balanced by a shift in population to hotter, drier regions.
- The economic productivity of water (dollars of Gross Domestic Product per unit of water used) is higher than it has ever been: it has nearly tripled since the 1970s, to $8.45 of GDP produced per hundred gallons used from only $3.18 in 1975 (in 2005 dollars).

For more information, call the Pacific Institute: 510.251.1600 (Dr. Peter Gleick or Heather Cooley).

For specifics about the data collection or reporting, call the U.S. Geological Survey.

Pacific Institute
654 13th Street
Oakland, CA 94612
www.pacinst.org

10/28/2009