Pacific Institute

Media Release

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U.S. Per Capita Water Use Falls to 1950s Levels

Analysis of U.S.G.S Data Shows that Efficiency is Effective

Oakland, Calif – Total United States water use barely changed in the five-year period ending in 2000 and is lower than it was in 1975. Per-capita water use has dropped even more dramatically. At the same time, the economic productivity of water in the US continues to improve. But, according to a Pacific Institute analysis of United States Geological Survey (USGS) water data released today, pumping of groundwater increased during this period, which could pose a threat.

"According to new figures released today by the USGS, American homes and businesses are becoming more efficient every year," said Dr. Peter Gleick, President of the Pacific Institute and a 2003 MacArthur Fellow. "This shows that one of the key assumptions of US water planners is wrong: we don't have to build massive, new water projects to meet ever-increasing demand. This allows us to avoid the economic, social, and environmental costs of building new dams, while ensuring we have the water we need for human use, agriculture, and a healthy economy."

According to the new figures, released every five years by the USGS, total water use increased by a paltry 1.7 percent from 1995 to 2000 (the most recent year for which numbers are available). During that same period, per capita water use declined 4 percent. The amount of water used per-person in the US is lower now than it has been since the mid-1950s. And per-capita water use in the nation has dropped more than 25 percent from its peak in the late 1970s.

"As these new data show, our modest efficiency and conservation efforts, combined with other technological and economic changes, have allowed us to cut per capita use even as our economy grows," Dr. Gleick noted. "But the bad new is that pumping of groundwater has increased. And in too many places our underground aquifers are already over stressed. Although groundwater is an important source of water, it's not unlimited and it's not being used responsibly."

The United States, although relatively water-rich, faces a range of threats to its vital supplies of fresh water. Overuse has turned the mighty 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. And other serious threats to our water resources – like climate change, wetland destruction, and population growth – loom large.

"The new USGS figures demonstrate that even our limited efforts to cut wasted water have yielded big results," continued Gleick, "But we are being hamstrung by our lack of a coherent national water policy. If we plan intelligently and improve our efficiency efforts we can have clean, secure supplies of freshwater, a thriving economy, and a healthy environment."

MORE – MORE – MORE

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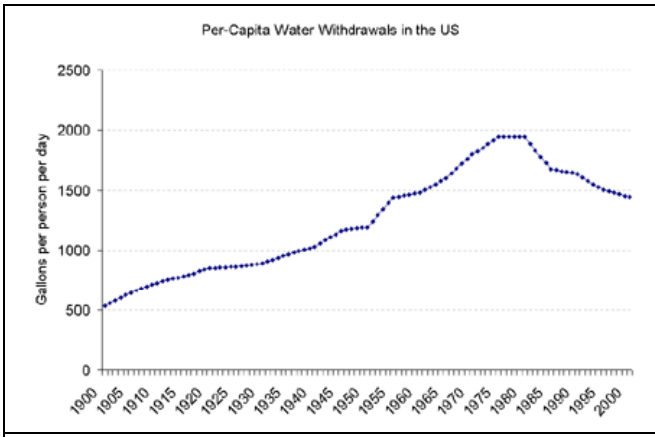
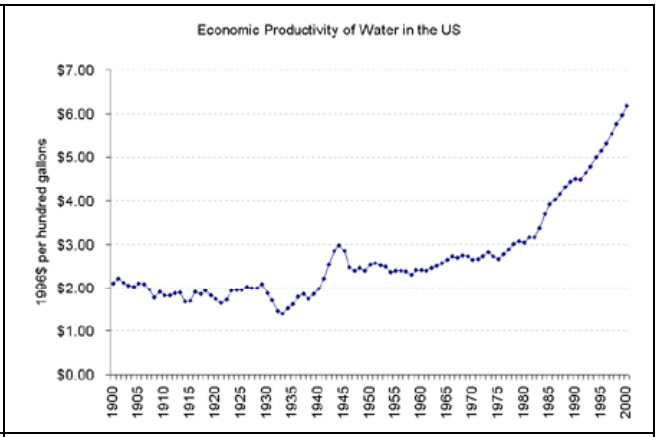
Selected Data Facts from the Pacific Institute analysis of new USGS data:

- Total water use in the US in 2000 is lower than it was in 1975.
- Per-capita water use in the US in 2000 is lower than it has been since the mid-1950s.
- The economic productivity of water (dollars of Gross National Product per unit of water used) is higher than it has ever been: it has more than doubled since the 1970s, to $6.20 per hundred gallons used.

Graphic Analysis of USGS Data:



Per-capita Water Withdrawals in the US
Full version online at: http://www.pacinst.org/usgs



Economic Productivity of Water in the US
Full version online at: http://www.pacinst.org/usgs

Useful Links

USGS data page: http://water.usgs.gov/pubs/circ/2004/circ1268/

Pacific Institute analysis of USGS data: http://www.pacinst.org/usgs

"Waste Not, Want Not" looks at California's urban efficiency:
http://www.pacinst.org/reports/urban_usage/index.htm

Pacific Institute proposal to create a National Water Commission:
http://www.pacinst.org/national_water_commission/index.html

Science Magazine piece looks at sustainable solutions for the global water crisis:
http://www.pacinst.org/reports/science_12_03/index.htm

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