

China's Water Crisis

By Fr. Timothy Michell,
Trappist Abbey, Lafayette, OR

Winston Churchill once described Communist as “An enigma wrapped in a riddle.” Much the same can be said of Communist China, today, except that China clearly has ambitions of becoming the world's dominant superpower. China's massive 1.3 billion population presents a huge market for potential trade and wealth, and a vast work force of cheap labor that American investors are eager to invest in, despite the fact that American workers lose jobs and the Chinese military consider the U.S. their greatest enemy. China already has a 3-million man standing army and is investing heavily in armaments, including a “blue-water” navy with submarines to control the Taiwan Straights and other international shipping lanes and to counter possible efforts by U.S. Naval carrier task forces to protect Taiwan. But what has all this to do with anyone interested in good drinking water and investment in China? Plenty, as you will see.

Yellow River Drying Up

Geographically, most of China's huge population is densely concentrated along their eastern coast, while most of the interior of China, including the vast Gobi Desert and the Himalayan Mountains is less hospitable for settlement. One exception is the broad Yellow River valley in northern China where about a third of China's population lives and where most of China's wheat is grown. It is also called “The cradle of Chinese civilization.” That, however, is changing because of mistakes made by communist central planners. Due to over-use, the once mighty flowing Yellow River now runs dry, two-thirds of the year, before it even reaches the sea. As a correspondent in Ningxia writes: “It's like the Rhine petering out in central Germany or the Nile drying up in northern Sudan. The whole region teeters on disaster. Global warming could push it over the edge.” Another report from Beijing says: “For 50 years there has been a steady decline in rainfall.” And if the six-year drought in the Yellow River area continues due to global warming, some are predicting the creation of a dustbowl situation that would dwarf that in the U.S. during the 1930's. China would then have to import wheat and hundreds of millions of peasant farmers would be

forced into the already crowded coastal area to survive.

Groundwater Supply

What happens to available groundwater supplies though, when you concentrate millions of people into a limited area, as China has done around their major production cities? The answer is obvious. Potable groundwater is quickly used up, faster than it can replenish. That is what is happening in China. Beijing's *China Daily* newspaper reports that some 50 cities along China's eastern coast are sinking! As groundwater is pumped out of the aquifer beneath the cities to meet the demands of the people and factory production, the water level drops and the earth above caves in, due to the weight of the overlying earth and buildings above. So, not only are they using up their groundwater faster than it can replenish, but they are also ruining and compressing their aquifers so they cannot hold water in the future. That, of course, means they will have little or no groundwater in the future from compressed aquifers.

Beijing, itself has already sunk 29 inches or more. That poses a threat to their hosting the 2008 Olympics and the Beijing's International Airport. Other production cities vital to their prosperous economy, like Shanghai, Tianjin, and Taijuan have sunken over 6.5 feet, ruining factories and underground pipes, etc. and causing millions of dollars in damage. All because of depleted groundwater and compressed aquifers.

Surface Water Supply

Well, if they run out of groundwater, at least they still have surface water sources (i.e. lakes, rivers, streams) to draw from right? Not quite. For the past 25 years the communist government has given priority to economic growth, at the expense of everything else. Like their great “Cultural Revolution” fiasco and the drying up of the Yellow River, sacrificing everything for economic growth has had calamitous consequences. China is, indeed, now the third largest economy in the world, but at a terrible ecological cost. Their industrial production wastes have polluted much of their surface water and the sewage from millions of workers must go somewhere. Normally, that is flushed out to sea in their rivers. *U.S. Water News* reports that 200 billion tons of untreated sewage and industrial

waste are discharged into the rivers every year. So where are they to get their drinking water from?

Acid Rain

If all that were bad enough, smoke from the coal burning factories and power plants has created a serious acid rain condition, heavily polluting lakes and rivers. According to a government report, 218 cities are suffering severe levels of acid rain. We know acid rain kills trees and vegetation. What will it do to people who drink it? At least they can boil lake and river water to sanitize it, but boiling cannot eliminate the acid rain chemicals, rather, it will concentrate them more.

Even so, a correspondent in Beijing reports that 70% of the energy needed by China for its prosperous economy is generated by burning coal, and that the communist leaders want to build 550 more coal burning plants to quadruple their national output and wealth by the year 2020 (“Damn the torpedoes. Full ‘smoke’ ahead”). In addition, automobile owners in prosperous Beijing, alone, have more than doubled in the last five years, to over two million vehicles and this increase is matched in other prosperous cities, as well. Consequently, China has become the world’s second largest oil importer after the U.S., and now competes with us for the oil we need for our own economy, driving up prices for oil and gasoline at the pump.

If China is already suffering from severe acid rain conditions in their surface water and forests, what will four-times the smoke from an additional 550 coal burning plants do to their ecology and drinking water? And to global warming, we might add, that may well cause the predicted “dustbowl” conditions in the Yellow River area. Will China sacrifice its new prosperity and claim as a world superpower by cutting back on its climate changing carbon dioxide emissions from burning coal and petroleum fossil fuels? No way! But things can’t go on the way they are, and even get worse without destroying the very prosperity they have sacrificed everything for.

Caveat Investor

Read China’s tealeaves. The future of the Pe, Nan, and Chung kingdoms is not bright despite their booming economy, because they are running out of water. No nation or economy can survive without drinking water. They are having to over pump their

groundwater aquifers to supply the demand and collapsing them in the process. Their sinking cities are the result of that. At the same time, they are rendering their surface water sources undrinkable by sewage, industrial waste, and acid rain as if there were no tomorrow. They need the coal burning power plants that cause the acid rain, to power their booming economy, but the global warming gases they produce may well cause the predicted dustbowl situation in the Yellow River area. As the correspondent in Ningxia says: “The whole region teeters on disaster and global warming could push it over the edge.” If that happens, China’s prosperous economy will be “toast” and probably their communist government, as well, but what a price the noble, long-suffering Chinese people will have to pay for that!

There is an ambitious plan to bring water in from a large aquifer under the Gobi Desert and from springs at the base of the Himalayas by the year 2050, but those sources are hundreds or thousands of miles away, but it does show how desperate the situation is. Chinese authorities think the water crisis will peak in 2030 when their population reaches 1.6 billion, but it can come much sooner than that if their coal burning plants continue or increase producing the global warming gases. One way or another, it is only a matter of time and will be interesting to see what happens, both to China and American investments there.