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TROUBLED WATERS

Our Precious Freshwater Supplies Are Shrinking

by Linda Sechrist

Virtually all water, atmospheric water vapor and soil moisture presently gracing the Earth has been perpetually recycled through billions of years of evaporation, condensation and precipitation. As all living things are composed of mostly water and thus a part of this cycle, we may be drinking the same water that a Tyrannosaurus Rex splashed in 68 million years ago, along with what was poured into Cleopatra's bath.

Perhaps this mythological sense of water's endlessness or the National Aeronautics and Space Administration images from outer space of a blue planet nearly three-quarters covered by water makes us complacent. Yet only 2.5 percent of Earth's water is not salt water and of sufficient quality to be consumable by humans, plants and animals.

Vulnerable to the demands of humanity's unprecedented population explosion, careless development and toxic pollution and other contamination, we must reexamine this precious resource. Sandra Postel, founder of the Global Water Policy Project, who has studied freshwater issues for more than 30 years, says, "Communities, farmers

and corporations are asking what we really need the water for, whether we can meet that need with less, and how water can be better managed [through] ingenuity and ecological intelligence, rather than big pumps, pipelines, dams and canals."

Clean drinking water is rapidly being depleted all around the world.

Seeking to reclaim lost ground in the protection of our water and wetland resources, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) proposed the 2015 Clean Water Rule. The new regulations are needed to restore the strength to the 1972 Clean Water Act

that has been weakened by the courts and previous administrations.

Notably, within hours of activating the regulation, the EPA was served with lawsuits from corporate polluters, and within weeks, more than 20 state attorneys general filed suit against it. Today the legal battle continues over whether the new regulation will be allowed to stay in force or not.

"Every day, local, state and federal governments are granting permission to industries to pollute, deforest, degrade and despoil our environments, resulting in serious effects on our planet and our bodies," says Maya K. van Rossum, a

Delaware Riverkeeper and head of the four-state Delaware Riverkeeper Network.

Under van Rossum's leadership the network has created a national initiative called For the Generations advocating for the passage of constitutional protection for environmental rights at both the state and federal levels. It was inspired by a legal victory secured by van Rossum and her organization in 2013 in a case titled *Robinson Township, Delaware Riverkeeper Network, et al. vs. the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, which used Pennsylvania's Constitutional Environmental Rights Amendment to strike down significant portions of a pro-fracking piece of legislation as unconstitutional. Until this legal victory, Pennsylvania's constitutional environmental rights amendment was dismissed as a mere statement of policy rather than a true legal protection.

"Each individual process of fracking uses on the order of 5 million gallons of freshwater water mixed with chemicals for drilling and fracking operations, introducing highly contaminated wastewater into our environment," explains van Rossum. "Every frack increases the chances of carcinogenic chemical leakage into the soil and water sources." In the pioneering Pennsylvania case, the court's ruling made clear that the environmental rights of citizens aren't granted by law, but are

Water is the foundation of life.

inherent and rights that cannot be removed, annulled or overturned by government or law.

"Even more significant, the court stated that these

environmental rights belong to present generations living on Earth today and to future generations," enthuses van Rossum. She also cites that although America's *Declaration of Independence* includes several inalienable rights, our federal constitution and those of 48 states fail to provide protection for three basic needs required to enjoy them—the right to pure water, clean air and healthy environments.

Van Rossum's audiences are shocked to learn that clean water isn't enforced as a human right. Threatened by myriad environmental, political, economic and social forces, and contamination from carcinogenic pesticides, toxic herbicides, chemical warfare and rocket fuel research materials plus heavy metals like mercury and lead, an era of clean water scarcity already exists in parts of our own country and much of the world. Episodic tragedies like the 2015 Gold King Mine wastewater spill near Silverton, Colorado, and Flint, Michigan's current lead-laced drinking water crisis raise public awareness.

"The technologies and know-how exist to increase the productivity of every liter of water," says Postel. "But



Freshwater Needs Spur Fresh Thinking

United Nations World
Water Development Report
Tinyurl.com/UNWaterReport

Food & Water Watch on
Corporate Takeover of Water
Tinyurl.com/CorporateWaterTakeover

Public Citizen on How to Protect
Our Public Right to Clean Water
Tinyurl.com/WhyOpposeWaterPrivatization

U.S. Environmental Protection
Agency Roster of Contaminated
Water Cleanup Sites
epa.gov/superfund

Clean Water Rule Call to Action
epa.gov/cleanwaterrule

citizens must first understand the issues and insist on policies, laws and institutions that promote the sustainable use and safety of clean water."

Linda Sechrist is a senior staff writer for Natural Awakenings. Connect at ItsAllAboutWe.com.

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