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## **Profiteers Cashing In on Nation's Catastrophic Water Crisis**

**In face of historic drought, nation's largest aquifers and reservoirs drying up**

- Lauren McCauley, staff writer

America's food growing regions face a crisis of "catastrophic" proportions as historic drought continues to drive the nation's largest water reserves to record lows. Amidst the shortages, private landowners are facing harsh criticism for seeking profits from this dwindling public resource.

"We're headed for a brick wall at 100 miles per hour," said James Mahan, a scientist at the USDA's Agricultural Research Service lab in Lubbock, Texas. "And, really, the effects of climate change are branches hitting the windshield along the way."

Mahan was specifically referring to the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer, an underground reserve that spreads 111.8 million acres across eight states and provides water to much of Texas as well as to the millions of acres of farmland that make up "America's Breadbasket." **According** to *NBC News*, after years of "punishing drought" and chronic mismanagement, the Ogallala now faces "catastrophic depletion," with profound implications for the millions worldwide fed by the farms which rely on the aquifer.

The draining of the Ogallala is also indicative of what is happening to water sources across the western United States.

**According** to the latest assessment by the U.S. Drought Monitor, huge swaths of California, Nevada, Texas and

Oklahoma are experiencing "extreme" or "exceptional" drought. In June, nearly 80 percent of California was under "extreme" drought conditions while the area considered to be in the highest category of drought—"exceptional"—continues to grow.

This week, Lake Mead—the country's largest reservoir which provides up to 40 million people in the U.S. and Mexico with a portion of their drinking water—is also **expected** to reach a record low, according to estimates by the federal Bureau of Reclamation.

As reserves are drying up, reports of landowners "cashing in" on the water market highlight the dangers of granting private control to this essential public resource.

In California, where the price of water has increased tenfold in the past five years, private landowners and water districts alike are driving the cost up further and making millions by auctioning off their private water reserves, *AP* recently **reported**.

And as *NBC* highlights, the Ogallala crisis has been driven largely by Texas' "right to capture" law, which has enabled wealthy landowners to capitalize on the crisis. The law—which essentially states that "If you own the land, you and only you own the water"—has reportedly enabled oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens to sell the water from beneath his sprawling 211,000 acre ranch to water-impooverished municipalities for \$103 million.

"Here's a guy selling a natural resource which is almost universally recognized – except in Texas – as a public resource," observed Burke Griggs, Ph.D., consulting professor at the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University.

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