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Citation Details

Jaeger, W.K. et al. 2017. Finding Water Scarcity Amid Abundance Using Human–Natural System Models. PNAS, 114(44).

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Finding water scarcity amid abundance using human–natural system models

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Edited by Jacob Schewe, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Potsdam, Germany, and accepted by Editorial Board Member Hans J. Schellnhuber September 20, 2017 (received for review April 25, 2017)

Water scarcity afflicts societies worldwide. Anticipating water shortages is vital because of water’s indispensable role in social-ecological systems. But the challenge is daunting due to heterogeneity, feedbacks, and water’s spatial-temporal sequencing throughout such systems. Regional system models with sufficient detail can help address this challenge. In our study, a detailed coupled human–natural system model of one such region identifies how climate change and socioeconomic growth will alter the availability and use of water in coming decades. Results demonstrate how water scarcity varies greatly across small distances and brief time periods, even in basins where water may be relatively abundant overall. Some of these results were unexpected and may appear counterintuitive to some observers. Key determinants of water scarcity are found to be the cost of transporting and storing water, society’s institutions that circumscribe human choices, and the opportunity cost of water when alternative uses compete.

water scarcity | climate change | coupled human–natural system | hydro-economic model | conveyance cost

Declining access to water is a significant problem for up to 2 billion people, impairing food production, human health, economic development, and ecosystem services (1). Water scarcity can result in crop failures, wildfire, fish die-offs, urban water shutoffs, and groundwater depletion leading to irreversible land subsidence (2). Contributing factors include growing populations, incomes, and a changing climate. Recent droughts in the western United States have resulted in substantial losses to agriculture and other sectors, and damages to forests, fish, and wildlife (3, 4).

Water is an integral part of social-ecological systems. Predicting water scarcity and designing mitigation and adaption policies can be extremely challenging because these systems are complex and are characterized by nonlinear feedbacks, strategic interactions, and social, spatial, and temporal heterogeneity (5).

Previous studies have investigated water scarcity at regional or national scales using aggregate measures of water abundance relative to overall demand (6, 7). Supply has typically been measured as annual basin discharge, and demand projections have reflected average per capita water use (7, 8). Given the complex role water plays in human–natural systems, such aggregate approaches may not be able to anticipate when and where water scarcity may emerge, making it difficult for policymakers to address rising water scarcity.

This study examines how climate change, population growth, and economic growth will alter the availability and use of water in coming decades, using the example of the Willamette River Basin (WRB), Oregon. The model developed for this purpose has high spatial and temporal resolution, and detailed representations of economic and biophysical subsystems (see *SI Appendix* for details). Models of coupled human–natural systems take many forms (5, 9). Where markets and incentives partly

drive allocation and use of land, water and other resources have been integrated in human process and biophysical models in a simulation or optimization framework (e.g., refs. 10 and 11) including climate-economy models (12). The main components and linkages of this model are characterized in Fig. 1, indicating how human uses of land and water interact with flows of surface and groundwater, mediated by water rights, markets, and regulations. The goals of the study are twofold: first, to understand where and when water scarcity may arise and to recognize the factors contributing to, and potentially mitigating, future water scarcity; and second, to assess the importance of a high level of system detail to gain insights into emerging water scarcity.

The results are illuminating in two main ways. First, the model reveals unexpected changes in water availability and use arising from interactions between human and natural subsystems. In some cases, feedbacks or indirect effects in one component of the model offset expected direct scarcity impacts. Second, the model demonstrates that water scarcity, defined as the marginal value of a unit of water (13), varies significantly across small distances (meters) and brief time periods (days), even in our study basin, where water is relatively abundant overall. There are three key contributors to water scarcity: (i) the costs of transporting water across locations, storing water over time, and transforming the quality

Significance

Climate change will heighten the need to anticipate water shortages worldwide. The task is daunting due to water’s variability, spatial-temporal movement, feedbacks, and other system complexities. A high-resolution coupled human–natural system model identifies how both climate change and socio-economic drivers will alter water scarcity in future decades. The results illuminate how water scarcity varies greatly across small distances and brief time periods, even in basins where water may be relatively abundant overall. These findings, and other unexpected results that may seem counterintuitive, underscore the potential value of such models for policy.

Author contributions: W.K.J., A.A., D.P.B., H.C., D.R.C., R.H., C.L., K.M., P.W.M., A.W.N., A.J.P., C.L.S., D.T., and D.P.T. designed research, performed research, analyzed data, and wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission. J.S. is a guest editor invited by the Editorial Board.

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Data deposition: The data reported in this paper have been deposited in ScholarsArchive@OSU: hdl.handle.net/1957/58613, hdl.handle.net/1957/58612, hdl.handle.net/1957/59984, hdl.handle.net/1957/59886, and hdl.handle.net/1957/48884.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1706847114/-DCSupplemental.

ref. 26) adapted the Penman–Monteith approach. Spatially explicit irrigation and municipal water rights were fully represented. Crop planting, growth, and daily evapotranspiration were modeled following FAO-56 (27, 28) and similar to Seibert (29). Additionally, soil moisture, groundwater flows, economic models of farm irrigation decisions and urban water use, as well as the releases from 13 federal dams, were developed for this study. See *SI Appendix* for detailed descriptions.

These submodels are linked using *Willamette Envision*, an integrated modeling framework that simulates spatially and temporally explicit human and natural system processes, as described in *SI Appendix*. The reference case and alternative scenarios were developed working closely with a broad stakeholder community.

Reference Case Scenario. The central simulation is a “reference case” scenario that reflects midrange projections for climate change and population and income growth, as well as status quo assumptions for most institutions (water rights, land use regulations, reservoir and forest management), for technology, and for most prices. Over 20 alternative scenarios were simulated for sensitivity analysis (e.g., high climate change, high population growth), counterfactual comparisons to isolate specific changes (no population growth, stable climate), to evaluate policies to mitigate future water scarcity (irrigation expansion, high water prices), or as combinations. See *SI Appendix* for details.

The reference case scenario finds that annual outflow from the Willamette River averages $29.6 \times 10^9 \text{ m}^3$ [24×10^6 acre-feet (af)], whereas human withdrawals plus instream regulatory flows average $5.5 \times 10^9 \text{ m}^3$ (4.5×10^6 af). This apparent surplus would appear to preclude water scarcity. Nevertheless, notable scarcity emerges when we examine finer spatial and temporal scales.

Based on over 40 climate scenarios, the downscaled general circulation model (GCM)-derived outputs indicate that by the year 2100, the WRB will be between $1.1 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ($2 \text{ }^\circ\text{F}$) and $7 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ($12.6 \text{ }^\circ\text{F}$) warmer than today (19, 20). Winter temperatures are projected to rise between $0.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ($33 \text{ }^\circ\text{F}$) and $5.5 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ($42 \text{ }^\circ\text{F}$). The months of July to September are projected to warm about $2 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ ($3.6 \text{ }^\circ\text{F}$) more than in winter. Climate models differ about whether the WRB will be drier or wetter, but the majority of climate model runs examined show slightly wetter winters and drier summers.

Population is projected to increase from 2.6 million to 5.4 million over the period (*SI Appendix, Table S1*), expanding developed land area by 53% (716 km^2) and displacing 469 km^2 previously in agriculture and 235 km^2 previously in forest use (Fig. 2A). Urban water

use is projected to rise by 110%, due mainly to population growth. Real household income is expected to increase by 175% by 2100.

Snowpack, in the midrange climate scenarios, declines between 87% and 94% by 2100 (Fig. 2A and B), hastening runoff and reducing spring and summer flows. In subbasins without reservoirs or with low groundwater contributions, these changes reduce the water available at lower elevations. In particular, the federal reservoirs fill to lower levels during the summer when reservoir recreation competes with “minimum conservation flows” established under the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) (30) and other obligations, including irrigation water rights tied to stored water.

Variations Across Subbasins. Snow provides winter storage and spring-summer flows for higher elevation eastern subbasins, but very little for lower elevation western subbasins (Fig. 2A). Even among eastern subbasins, the impact of snow on streamflow varies substantially due to differences in elevation and geologic mediation of low flows by groundwater contributions (15, 31). These differences are reflected in Table 1 (columns A and B), where the April–September flux varies by a factor of eight. The adequacy of existing flows to meet regulatory minimums also varies by subbasin (Table 1, columns C and D). Moreover, April–August flows in some subbasins decline relative to instream requirements (column E).

Some of the differences affecting water scarcity across subbasins are due to changes in urban and agriculture land uses (columns F–H), differences in forest growth due to harvest and wildfires, and differences in how land cover changes affect snow and runoff due to evapotranspiration and snow sublimation. For example, forest harvest and wildfires can cause large changes in forest water use (discussed below).

Finding Scarcity Amid Abundance

The Role of Costs. If it were costless to store and transport water, or to improve its quality, water scarcity could in principle be eliminated given the overall abundance of water in the WRB (barring institutional impediments). Our analysis, however, indicates that water scarcity in the WRB varies seasonally and across locations and uses. Relatively fine-scale processes such as market adjustments, barriers due to costs and profitability, or government regulations can have large consequences for scarcity.

Water storage and transportation costs are not uniform across the WRB. In some cases, these costs are very low, as with gravity-based conveyance in summer along watercourses below federal reservoirs. Although built primarily for flood regulation, in summer the reservoirs normally store $2 \times 10^9 \text{ m}^3$ (1.6×10^6 af) of water, much of which could be released to flow downstream at

Table 1. Differences in hydrology and economics across subbasins

River Basin	Avg. flow		Regulatory		Change in April–Aug.		Surface irrigation, % of basin	Developed land, % of land area
	April–Sept, m^3/s	Flow April–Sept, mm/d	min. April–Sept, m^3/s	Avg. flow/reg. min., July–Aug.	flow 2010–20s to 2080–90s, %	Farmland, % of area		
	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)	(H)
Clackamas	64	2.3	14.7	2.8	−4.1	7.9	0.5	1.7
Long Tom*	8	0.7	0.8	2.1	8.0	29.9	4.3	6.5
Marys*	9	1.0	1.8	1.5	13.5	22.9	2.7	2.9
McKenzie	107	2.7	29.0	2.4	−7.3	2.0	0.4	0.5
Molalla	42	1.6	9.2	2.7	−0.5	39.0	4.8	3.2
North Santiam	128	5.6	36.8	2.3	−3.9	9.9	1.6	0.5
South Santiam	66	2.1	30.2	1.3	−1.4	14.8	2.5	0.6
Tualatin River*	21	1.0	4.4	1.6	17.0	28.4	6.3	18.2
Yamhill River*	18	1.2	0.9	1.7	11.3	54.6	12.1	3.8
Willamette,	88	1.5	61.4	0.7	−3.4	3.4	0.4	0.5
Coast & Middle Forks								
Average	55	2	19	1.9	2.9	23.3	3.9	4.2

*Indicates subbasins on the western side of the WRB (Fig. 3).

minimum flow requirements aimed at protecting ecosystem services will increase competition with out-of-stream demands (33).

System linkages and feedbacks can be highly idiosyncratic across subbasins and vary at fine spatial and temporal scales. Without a model, it would have been extremely difficult to identify and predict these relationships for the WRB. Three examples illustrate the challenges that such dynamics represent for predicting water scarcity and designing policy responses.

Offsetting Seasonal Shifts in Supply and Demand. In the first example, climate warming generates two responses, one in water supply and one in demand. The first response to warmer temperatures is a reduction in snow accumulation and melt, along with a shift in melt timing to earlier in spring. This response reduces summer surface flows. The second response is a human response. Because of warmer spring temperatures, farmers are able to plant earlier, which shifts both the start and the completion of irrigation (Fig. 2C). Thus, a larger proportion of irrigation occurs earlier in the year, when snowmelt runoff and precipitation are higher. This decreases the projected number of irrigation shutoffs due to water scarcity by 10–30% in both the reference case and high climate change scenarios. This is because, although in future decades surface water supplies become relatively scarce in late July and August, irrigators have increasingly completed irrigating by that time, resulting in fewer regulatory shutoffs.

The shift to earlier planting dates has an additional positive effect on water scarcity: Although warmer midsummer temperatures would generally raise crop ET and increase irrigation requirements, the earlier planting has an offsetting effect. More of the plant's growth takes place when temperatures are lower and precipitation is higher, resulting in no rise in average crop ET during the 90-y simulation.

Urban Demand Growth and Reduced Irrigation. The second example involves the potential mitigating effect of urban growth on water scarcity. Projected growth in urban water demand is the single largest change in direct human water use through 2100. Many city governments in the basin face uncertainty about how best to secure adequate future water supplies. Surface flows are already fully appropriated, and rights to federally stored water are reserved for agriculture. Moreover, instream flow requirements account for a majority of summer water allocations. However, a city's growing demand for water will coincide with urban land expansion, and the likely patterns of this expansion overlap with some of the spatially referenced irrigation water rights in our model. For the six main metropolitan areas, the model predicts urban consumptive use of water (from outdoor use only since indoor water use is returned to streams with minor losses) to increase $45 \times 10^6 \text{ m}^3$ (Table 2). However, due to the land use changes accompanying this growth, the displacement of surface irrigation offsets one-third of the increase. These effects vary significantly across cities depending on the extent and direction of urban expansion and on the proximity to surface irrigated farmlands. When groundwater irrigation is included, more than

80% of the urban water use increases are offset by reduced irrigation in our model (Table 2).

Forest Water Use and Wildfire. The third example involves climate change and forest water use. With warmer temperatures, water requirements for a given stand of forest will increase, but drier forests are also more prone to wildfires. Increases in wildfire frequency will result in a more open and patchy landscape with fewer mature trees and, thus, a lower average foliage density (leaf area) (19). Because forest water use (ET and canopy snow sublimation) varies positively with leaf area, more wildfires mean a reduction in water use. This, in turn, allows more precipitation falling in forest zones to be routed downstream. This means that climate change could actually lead to increases in the runoff ratio despite increasing evaporative demand (26). In our reference case scenario, there is a projected decrease in forest water use of 315 million m^3 for April–July between the 2010s and 2090s due mainly to the effects of projected wildfires (*SI Appendix, section 4.2*). Efforts to suppress wildfires can be expected to increase forest water use. Indeed, a counterfactual scenario that represents the high climate scenario but with no wildfires finds increased forest water use by 1.4 billion $\text{m}^3 \cdot \text{y}^{-1}$. While subbasin-specific impacts from wildfire are impossible to predict since the location of future wildfires is unknown, this example illustrates the possibility of unexpected results that may appear counterintuitive.

Fine Scale and Large Magnitudes. In addition to these examples of how feedbacks and linkages can produce unexpected results, we find a strikingly high variability in water scarcity at fine spatial and temporal scales. For example, upland forested areas will exhibit high water stress and increased wildfire risk (*SI Appendix, section 4.2*), despite in some cases being close to large federal reservoirs. Similarly, distances as small as 100 m separate irrigators whose legal right to water exceeds what can be put to beneficial use from farmers who have no economically feasible options to acquire irrigation water rights, due to protected instream flows or high conveyance costs that make more distant options uneconomical.

Another powerful way in which this type of model is valuable is that it compels us to recognize what is large versus what is small. Many components related to water supply or demand turn out to be much larger (or smaller) than initially believed. For example, initially Willamette Water 2100 researchers and stakeholders focused on future urban industrial water and did not pay attention to forest water use, but the former has turned out to be nearly negligible relative to the latter. Similarly, the anticipated expansion in crop irrigation in the basin has been a central rationale for reserving the water stored in federal reservoirs for agriculture. However, we find that only 1–3% of unirrigated land would be able to bring stored surface water into use profitably, due to the high transport costs.

Using Regional System Models for Water Policy

Water shortages frequently come with high social costs. The annual costs of California's recent experience have been estimated

Table 2. Urban water demand growth net of displaced irrigation, 2010–2100 (1,000 m^3)

Urban area	Change in urban water use	Net of displaced irrigation:	
		Surface only	Surface and groundwater
Portland	30,872	21,626	7,195
McMinnville	1,457	–819	–1,528
Salem	7,391	4,616	989
Albany	1,510	1,208	393
Corvallis	1,004	486	–155
Eugene	3,158	2,513	618
Total	45,392	29,629	7,512

at \$2–3 billion (41). Whether shortages are the result of short-term drought conditions, the cumulative impacts of decades of misguided water policies, or long-term shifts in water supply and demand, the costs are high, and hence so too are the potential benefits from intervening to mitigate future water crises. A system model can be a critical tool for designing effective policy interventions. The value of a given model will depend on whether it sheds new light on critical factors or key processes, and whether this new information is heeded by policymakers. In the case of the WRB, the model has allayed some fears (urban water shortages), while shifting focus toward other, less easily remedied sources of scarcity (forest health, instream flows, and stream temperatures).

Many of the insights from this model have clear relevance, applicability, and implications for other basins. For example, elsewhere in the western United States, emerging water scarcity can

also be expected to exhibit high spatial and temporal specificity, even while the particular causes and potential solutions may differ. In California, for example, rather than wildfires reducing water use by forests, climate change may cause changes in vegetation that increase forest consumptive use (42). Models of this kind may be particularly valuable in basins such as the Indus or Nile, where climate change, population growth, poverty and institutional failures place large vulnerable populations at high risk.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. This project was supported by National Science Foundation Grants 1039192 (Oregon State University), 1038925 (Portland State University), and 1038899 (University of Oregon). More detailed data descriptions are found at inr.oregonstate.edu/ww2100/data. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the US Department of Agriculture or Economic Research Service.

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