

A World of Water Woes



The water crisis in Brazil came to a head on Nov. 5 when a spill spewed millions of gallons of iron ore waste. According to a Dec. 20 LA Times article, the Rio Doce turned bright orange and at least 13 people died in the initial flooding, with hundreds more displaced and suffering illnesses from their tainted water supply. A researcher told the newspaper “there’s no telling how many more might die from long-term public health problems generated by the disaster.”

A broken dam was to blame for the spill.

A TeleSur article reported that the spill released 60 million cu meters of mine waste—equivalent to 20,000 Olympic swimming pools.

Speaking of which, the downtrodden country is to host the 2016 Olympic Games this summer.

The disaster’s timing also was detrimental, not only because Brazil has long been battling a major water shortage, but because iron ore is one of the country’s most important exports, the LA Times article said.

As if things aren’t bad enough for Brazil, residents of Sao Paolo are facing the dreaded Zika virus, a mosquito-borne pathogen, according to a Wall Street Journal article. The rise of the virus in Brazil may be linked to a surge in its mosquito population—which ironically is linked to the country’s severe drought, which led residents to storing emergency water supplies in swimming pools and other containers, creating breeding grounds for mosquitos. The Zika virus, which causes symptoms including fever, rashes and vomiting, is rarely lethal, but it has been linked to thousands of cases of infant brain damage, according to the article.

Most of us gazing at this editorial page right now do not reside in Brazil. However, as you may have guessed, I am about to parallel Brazil’s problems with the U.S.s. You may think, “but Brazil is in a much greater state of dire straits than anyplace in the U.S. in terms of water.” While we are nowhere near the perils Brazilians are experiencing, I am actually not the first to be comparing the two countries in terms of water woes: A Fortune.com article did so back in April 2015: “How on earth are two of the most water-rich nations having H₂O crises?” the headline inquired.

The article found commonality between the two nations in the form of sudden changes in weather patterns which contributed to water crises, changes that could be long lasting. The article also suggested that both nations should look to Ireland and Australia—two countries that have successfully dealt with water crises.

As we enter 2016, though, things are looking up in the U.S. According to an article from the San Gabriel Valley Tribune, the anticipated El Niño winter may mean a bookend on a drought that has been ongoing since 2011 in California. Still, “it will take at least two years of above-average rain and snow to reverse the drought,” the article cited water managers and scientists as saying.

The Fortune.com article advised countries in crises to, above all, do as Australia has done and “give water a rethink.”

What that means is, countries would be wise to assign an economic value to water “that reflects its vital nature and scarcity.”

Even though the U.S.s water issues may pale in comparison to Brazil’s, it is imperative not to lose sight of the importance of water, no matter where you live. It also is imperative to keep innovating so that we can keep the word “crisis” out of our water—and help places like Brazil find relief.

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