

Texas Is the New Arizona, and Not in a Good Way

The state's growing population is outstripping its water resources, and climate change will only make it worse.

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Humans can survive whole days without food, shelter or internet, but they can't last long without water. Which is why it's so weird that American humans keep rushing to live in places where water is increasingly scarce. The latest dry hot spot is Texas.

Two fast-growing Texas towns have been in the news recently for being dehydrated. The first, Clyde, defaulted on a municipal bond because it didn't have enough water to sell to customers. A neighbor of Abilene, Clyde sits on the edge of West Texas, where relentless drought has shrunk reservoirs serving hundreds of thousands of people. (One lake in San Angelo, where I was born, is basically gone, at just 0.8% of capacity.) Clyde is small, with a population of about 4,000, but has grown by more than a third since the turn of the century — a familiar story in a state attracting people from around the country.

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The second newly famous place is Kyle, a city of more than 60,000 residents about a half-hour's drive south of Austin. It was America's second-fastest-growing city last year among places with 50,000 people or more, according to the US Census Bureau. Its 9% growth in 2023 was topped only by Georgetown, about a half-hour's drive *north* of Austin, which grew by nearly 11%. Kyle has grown by more than a third in just the past three years. Kyle became famous because the Wall Street Journal wrote about how its breakneck development is running up against dangerous heat and a lack of water.

Texas Towns Keep Getting Bigger

Nearly half of the 15 fastest-growing US cities last year were in Texas, and half of those were in the vicinity of Austin

Source: US Census Bureau

Note: Includes cities and towns with 50,000 or more people in 2022

Clyde and Kyle join a long list of increasingly hot, dry locales with booming populations, renewing questions about why Americans keep migrating so relentlessly toward the climate crisis instead of away from it. People escaping

wildfires and high housing prices in, say, California are moving into the path of new disasters, with fresh opportunities for financial ruin.

As the planet heats up, these places face a choice: Discourage these new arrivals and the sweet, sweet tax dollars they bring, or expensively overhaul their infrastructure to accommodate them.

“We have always built where we wanted to build, let people move where they want to move, and hoped we would find the resources to satisfy their demands,” Peter Gleick, co-founder and senior fellow at the Pacific Institute, a nonprofit research group in Oakland, said in an interview. “We’re now running up against a difficult reality: the realization there isn’t necessarily enough water to meet whatever demands we might have in the future.”

Arizona is the typical poster state for this problem. Three of the fastest-growing US cities are suburbs of Phoenix, which has long topped such lists even as its temperatures have soared and water has grown scarcer. But climate change is molding Texas into the next Arizona, only much bigger.

As University of Texas climate scientist Jay Banner explained it to me, the state is bisected by the 100th meridian, which for a long time was roughly the dividing line between the arid Southwest and the verdant, humid Southeast. As the planet

has warmed, drying out the soil, that dividing line has drifted slowly eastward. In the years to come, it will pass over the Interstate 35 corridor that connects San Antonio to Austin, Dallas and all towns in their orbit, including Kyle. About 12 million people now live in those metro regions alone, a population expected to double by 2050.

At the same time, the rising heat will dry out the soil, evaporating its water. Central Texas will start to look like Arizona. The population boom's accompanying development will worsen this by covering more ground with concrete, making it harder to replenish groundwater and increasing the urban heat island effect that boosts temperatures even higher.

“Demand goes way up, supply goes way down, which is not a sustainable future for Texas water resources,” Banner said.

There are solutions, but they involve political will, foresight and money. Lots and lots of money.

First, Texas could address the root of the problem by encouraging the transition away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy, slowing climate change and limiting warming. This feels unrealistic to ask of a state dominated by the fossil fuel industry. At the same time, Texas does lead the country in renewable-energy

deployment, taking advantage of its abundant sun and windy plains despite a hostile state government. So maybe there's hope.

Meanwhile, Texas should think longer term about its water problem rather than solving crises as they arise. For example, a local utility is building a \$250 million pipeline to pump water to Kyle from 40 miles away, which it claims will quench thirsts for the next 50 years. A water expert at Texas State University told the Journal that a more realistic estimate is 20 years. Math informs us that 20 years is less time than the 30-year term for the mortgages most homebuyers will take to live in Kyle.

Arizona, in contrast, requires that new developments prove they have a water source that will last a century. Of course, this is unpopular with developers, and 100-year forecasts are hardly precise. But at least the idea speaks to a water-consciousness Arizonans have developed over centuries of being parched. Texans don't have that sort of time.

Fixing aging water infrastructure is also critical. Texas lost 129 billion gallons of water in 2022 because of leaky pipes, according to the Texas Water Development Board's latest audit, enough to flood downtown Austin in 2 feet of the stuff. Booming population and weather extremes will put even more strain on antiquated systems. Texas' legislature recently approved a \$1 billion fund for upkeep, but that's a fraction of what will be needed.

Even the Disasters Are Bigger in Texas

The Lone Star State leads the US in total damages due to billion-dollar weather disasters since 1980, topping California, Florida and Louisiana

Source: NOAA

Note: Losses adjusted for CPI. Data as of August 8, 2024.

Texas could help cover these costs while also discouraging waste and at least cooling in-migration a smidgen by simply making water more expensive. Residential customers pay only about \$37 a month, on average, in Texas, according to a Forbes Home estimate, right in the middle of the pack of US states. Texas law limits how much utilities can raise rates, but they need more

leeway to charge heavy users more. And the state needs a more robust system of buying and selling water rights.

As politically painful and expensive as these ideas may seem, they will only get more expensive the longer Texas waits. As Banner notes, the state has an opportunity now, long before the I-35 megalopolis — San AusDal? — reaches full flower, to make infrastructure and building codes more water efficient, including making it easier to reuse “gray” wastewater.

Of course, with Texas facing a future of potentially a third of each year in temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or more, and with droughts becoming more frequent and severe, this problem might solve itself: Climate migration could finally move *away* from Texas.

But there’s no sign that’s happening yet. And millions of people without the means to pull up stakes or the ability to unload homes that lack adequate water supply will be stuck. As with so much else involving the climate crisis, the sooner Texas deals with this problem, the better.