TRANSCRIPT

The Truth of The Matter

“Water Stress in the U.S. with NYT's Chris Flavelle and CSIS's Caitlin Welsh”

DATE
Wednesday, July 26, 2023

Featuring

Christopher Flavelle
Climate Reporter, New York Times

CSIS EXPERTS

H. Andrew Schwartz
Chief Communications Officer, CSIS

Caitlin Welsh
Director, Global Food and Water Security Program, CSIS
I am Andrew Schwartz, and you’re listening to The Truth of the Matter, a podcast by CSIS, where we break down the top policy issues of the day and talk with the people that can help us best understand what’s really going on.

This is a very special edition of Truth of the Matter. I have with me my colleague Caitlin Welsh, who’s the director of our Global Food and Water Security Program. We also have with us Chris Flavelle, who is the reporter for the New York Times, who covers climate change and, and mostly water lately. Chris, welcome Caitlin, welcome. One of the things we really want to talk about today is, is Chris, is your coverage of water related challenges in the United States, especially since we're launching this Global Food and Water Security Program. So, I wanted to ask you just to open up, can you give me a general sense of what we’re looking at with water crises in the United States? There’s multiple fronts.

Sure. And thanks for having me on. The standard line you hear is that with climate change, the problem is that there’s too much water where you don’t want it and not enough where you need it. And it’s, it’s a bit of a pat saying, but it’s true. And in so much of the west and other parts of the U.S., but primarily the west, right now, we are now what, 23 years into the mega drought that began in the year 2000. And the the results are somewhat mitigated by, as we know, a wet winter, but still not solved in any way. And I think one of the most visible and pressing challenges for the U.S. in terms of climate threats, it’s been eclipsed somewhat by the urgent issue of severe heat this month. But the thing with water is nothing works if you can’t get enough water. And so I’ve been focusing on water this year, mostly because it’s urgent and the consequences are impossible to overstate.

Caitlin, I want to bring you into this discussion, and I know you have a lot of questions for Chris, so please jump in.

Great, thanks Andrew. Chris, much of your reporting has focused on negotiations over water in the Colorado River Basin. Of course, there was a temporary deal reached in May one of your sources called that crisis a a, a slow moving disaster, and when the temporary deal was reached in May, another one of your sources talked about this as, as we should think about this temporary deal as essentially a stay of execution. So I’m, I’m just wondering about
what your thoughts are about the agreement reached in May, but also the way forward about looking to 2026 once the temporary agreement expires. And what we might agree to after that.

**Mr. Flavelle:** A point of agreement from everyone I spoke to was, the thing that really matters is the next deal, whatever arrangement is agreed to by the Colorado Basin states and the federal government’s for 2026 forward. And that’s going to be hard because number one, we don’t yet know how severe the shortage will be, but number two, it looks severe. And so you could argue to a degree the very wet winter, well, this is indisputable, the very wet winter made that short-term agreement much, much easier by reducing the immediate need for water conservation. But unless we get an insane amount of luck and this wet winter is repeated over and over, which seems almost impossible, there’s going to be a much increased need to find new sources of water conservation, levels of conservation that cannot be achieved without pretty meaningful changes in how and where people live, grow food, and do business. So that, that seemed by common consensus, the real concern, how to reach a longer deal in this changing environment.

**Ms. Welsh:** Yeah. Well, Chris, this is, that’s one of the things I appreciate most about your reporting is that you outlined not only the severity of the challenge, but also what possible solutions are and the fact that there are no perfect solutions. But you did some great reporting about efforts in the Phoenix area to limit municipal growth efforts to secure water from other sources looking all the way to Mexico, wondering about your thoughts there. And in addition, something that you just touched on, which is very important and which is the reason why we’re locating much of our work on water security in the global food security program is agriculture itself. Because there can be large amount of focus on urban growth, on reducing water for homes and lawns and swimming pools and golf courses. But at the end of the day, the majority of water that’s used is for agriculture. So that’s there.

**Mr. Flavelle:** Yeah, in, in the West you hear figures like upwards of two thirds, sometimes upwards of three quarters of total water use in places like Arizona and California or for agriculture. It’s a huge share in a sense. Look, I’m reaching here, but if there’s a silver lining to that, it’s that farmers know how to adjust, right? There’s a, farming is an industry that is built on a changing environment and adapting to a changing environment. So you can, you can fallow fields, you can change crop types, you can change your irrigation system. There is a really impressive suite of tools available and farmers know how
to use them to adjust to changing conditions. You don't have necessarily as much flexibility when it comes to the built environment. Speaking of glib phrases, as you'll hear, you can fallow a field. You can't fallow a subdivision. And the result is that places that are growing fast and converting land from agriculture to residential lose a lot of that flexibility to cope with shocks from sudden droughts.

So on the one hand, the fact that so much of water in the west is used for agriculture means there's more room to maneuver, but it also raises the stakes for everyone. Right? And growers in Arizona and elsewhere will tell you this, if you’re talking about how water in, say, Arizona is used, that doesn't just affect people in Arizona, right? If Arizona grows less alfalfa or other crops, that affects the food supply for people around the country and around the world. So the stakes are high and even global when you talk about water use for agriculture. So it’s, it’s an area where there’s great innovation, fantastic potential to do more with less water, but it's so important to get it right.

Mr. Schwartz: Chris, I want to ask you about desalination as a solution for all of this. It kind of hangs over the discussion, but I think a lot of people don’t realize all the implications that go with it. Can you describe?

Mr. Flavelle: For coastal areas facing long-term drought desalination, and look to the Middle East on this. Desalination is not just a solution, but often the solution problem with desalination is, well, there’s several. A big one is cost. It’s incredibly energy intensive and it produces a waste byproduct, brine. But there are parts of the world where that is, we've found ways around that. I think the more challenging thing is to what degree will desalination be part of the solution? Further inlands where you have to not only desalinate the water, but transport it over long distances. And also what does it mean for cost? There’s places like Arizona where part of the appeal and part of the reason for the high growth rate in Arizona is lower cost of living than other parts of the country. And if you start to factor in heavy water treatment costs, heavy in terms of high desalination costs, wastewater, recycling, other things that make the water more expensive, it starts to have an impact. So I think the future of these places will be determined by not just how available is water, but how much does that water cost and how does that compare with the willingness of people who live there and people who grow there to pay those costs. And, and that’s the stuff we’re trying to find out right now.
Ms. Welsh: That’s, uh, a high cost potential solution to water challenges that are being faced in Arizona, outlined in your reporting, not just cost in terms of dollars, but cost to the communities from which the water is coming, cost of the ecosystem, et cetera. You’ve also talked about infrastructure needs in other parts of the country that are experiencing other types of water related challenges. Extreme flooding in, in Vermont, for example, with infrastructure, not in a state to handle the, the amount of water that it received. Looking at Mississippi and challenges to drinking water there with residents of Jackson not able to access potable water, knowing that the level of investment in, in our water infrastructure is far greater than the funding that’s been allocated so far. What do you think we can do?

Mr. Flavelle: All true. Those are all good points. I’m lucky my job isn’t prescriptive. Policy makers in this area have a lot to worry about. One thing you often hear though, when it comes to sort of the world I live in in climate resilience and climate adaptation is the federal government spends a lot of money, right on disaster recovery preparedness on infrastructure. So, the charitable take here is though the solutions are very expensive, this is a world in which there is a lot of funding available. I think the challenge probably is less one of finding the resources and more one of finding the right solutions. I’m just trying to think of a good example for this. If you take a coastal area struggling with flooding and it needs some mix of structural protection, like perhaps sea walls or levies or elevated buildings and non-structural, maybe moving people away from harm’s way, those needs are huge, taken by themselves, but they happen in the context of what’s probably a big capital budget.

So, money exists. I think the question that’s really tough is not so much finding the money, but finding the right solutions and then getting buy-in from voters. So, I think landing on the right way to become resilience is even harder than finding the money find, I don’t want to dismiss that. Finding the money is a big deal. I don’t think it’s the hardest thing. I think the hardest thing is getting enough best practices that are seen as effective that local officials can then turn to with some degree of confidence and convince their voters it’s the right way forward.

Ms. Welsh: Yeah. Have you seen a positive example of this?

Mr. Flavelle: The length of my paw, of course, is evidence that there aren’t many good examples of this. You know what the kind of thing that you’ll often hear about as something to emulate is in parts of New Jersey, they’re doing good job building parks that can retain floodwater,
right? Finding built solutions that have multiple benefits that aren't just protecting against storms. I wish I knew, I think it's in Newark, it may be in Newark and I should know this, but finding infrastructure solutions that have both climate shock, resilience value, but also provide meaningful amenities that people want. Right? So like a park that can improve lives. I'm trying to think of other examples. I just note like the reverse is true, right? There are models that maybe worked in the past that are becoming less and less desirable. And here storm walls or sea walls are a great example. The Corps of Engineers has proposals in places around the country, but really significant sea walls to blunt storm surge and flooding. And in many places, the pushback from local residents has been severe. They've said, sure, it might work, but it doesn't improve the beauty or the livability of our home. So I think that challenge again is not finding the money, the money exists, the challenge is finding solutions people can agree on, and that is, that is much more difficult.

Mr. Schwartz: Is this a partisan issue? Do you see this as a partisan issue or is it really just a, a lifestyle issue for most people?

Mr. Flavelle: I think it's a, it's a partisan issue in as much as there are partisan divides around deference to governments and willingness to accept the idea that government programs are part of the solution. But even that, even on that, I think the difference isn't huge. I think Republicans are as willing as Democrats to accept federal money that will make where they live safer to a degree. There probably remains some partisan difference on the urgency of the threats and this idea that the government has to really move fast to build big projects. But at base, I think there's no real difference. There's a willingness to accept something's happening and solutions are necessary. Unlike climate change in general, where we're talking about emissions, which remains deeply partisan. I think this is a, an example of a situation where Americans are generally on the same page.

Mr. Schwartz: Right? Because when you bring it down to the local level where people have to live and work and raise children, raise families, it, it's not this big overarching climate challenge issue. It's a life issue. Correct?

Mr. Flavelle: At its core, it's life and safety for sure. But even maintaining lifestyle, right? Everybody wants their community to be protected and to remain an enjoyable place to live. There's a degree of difference in terms of planned solutions. And I think some people are more resistant to having the federal government come in and
say, we’re going to build this wall or, or do this giant project. But I think yes, in general, people want the same thing, which is to keep living their lives with as little change as possible as weather events get more severe.

Mr. Schwartz: Yeah. I can tell you from experience, there’s an awful lot of very deep conservative people in and around New Orleans, Louisiana, who certainly believe that they need to fortify the levees and they need to really fortify the wetlands around New Orleans, which is the next thing that needs to be dealt with.

Mr. Flavelle: Yeah. And you know, unfortunately is sort of a leader in another area, which is flood insurance. I think people red or blue Republican or Democrat, don’t want to pay incredible amounts of money for flood insurance. And Louisiana is testing that. So yeah, my sense is that the federal governments is just as vital in all parts of the country. You know, the one difference that I find is in states that have more of a tradition of sort of involved governments, those states might have an easier time addressing these challenges because at the state and local level, they’re just more staff and more expertise and more resource resources and more sophistication. Sometimes in more rural states, those officials may not have the same resources and they might may not be as aggressive in seeking federal help for infrastructure projects. But look, there’s so much money from FEMA and other federal agencies right now to spend on resilience that I think the federal government is desperately looking for ways to make sure that every part of the country has access to this funding. But again, the question can be, can you find projects people agree on?

Ms. Welsh: Certainly. Um, and as you pointed out, there are sometimes impediments to some communities even seeking that funding in the first place, like looking at Jackson, Mississippi. But you mentioned earlier that your work is not prescriptive and you're not in the solutions business, but you do put forward some fairly no nonsense solutions. For example, when it comes to flooding in Vermont, you highlighted the fact that there’s no comprehensive current national prescription database that would be quite useful for homeowners, communities, builders, the government, et cetera. Um, so hopefully some of the solutions that you do suggest are starting to be taken seriously. Um, among policy makers,

Mr. Flavelle: If there’s anything that people agree on, is that the current system isn’t great, right? So I think what I sense from federal and state policy makers is significant willingness to look at new solutions, which is, that’s, that’s great, right? The first sort of, the first burden
in fixing a policy problem is admitting that there's a problem. And especially with the amount of money moving through. I'm trying to find, I'm trying to find the right way to say this, that sounds appropriately rosy, but not crazy optimistic. I think the money hurdle has to a significant degree been cleared for now. I don't hear agencies saying, well, we'd like to do this or that, but the funding doesn't exist. That was true two years ago, three years ago. You don't hear that. Now, I also don't hear anywhere near as much as I used to. Well, we'd like to talk about solutions, but you know, it's difficult to talk about climate change in this or that state.

That's also an obstacle that I think has mostly fallen away even in Republican states. I don't hear people say that's the problem. Hate the question really is finding the smart projects. And if you talk to people at FEMA or other agencies, I think there's a, a recognition that we don't yet have the tools for screening projects for their resilience value in a way that you can rely on. It sounds very bland to say that we need better data, but we do need better data. It's maybe the un sexiest of all policy prescriptions, but it's one everyone agrees on. I think the real challenge would be the classic situation of if you know the right solution and it'll keep people safe, but it will disrupt their lives. Whether that means if you're in a storm prone area, people moving, or if you're in a drought prone area, maybe people moving new or not, not moving there in the first place. This question of adaptation as a form of changed behavior that forced people to deviate from their current habits, that's the hardest part, right? And so whether we're talking about drought or storms or flooding, that remains the sort of political live wire that I sense that federal and state officials really would still rather not talk about even when the other solutions aren't going to work.

Ms. Welsh: Last question from me, Chris. The United States positions itself as a leader on global water security issues in many ways. We really are. We can take lessons from our own experience domestically when helping other countries address their challenges related to water security, particularly as they relate to climate change. What do you think some of those lessons are?

Mr. Flavelle: Until the situation with Colorado, so let's say until 20 years ago, I think one of the great lessons from the American experience with water was the power of engineering to change a landscape, right? If you look at the way the west has been transformed and population has blossomed, and agriculture has blossomed largely due to fantastically large scale water investments through the Bureau of Reclamation until pretty recently, it looked like an amazing success
story. One with, you know, significant maybe impact on the natural world, but it mostly seemed like a success. And I think the lesson of the last 20 years, the last few years in particular, is what happens when conditions change. You know, of course the, the through line of climate adaptation is how do you adjust when things change? I don't know if the United States has an especially compelling success story to point to on that.

I don't know if anywhere does, but I don't know if this sort of ongoing decades, long century long experiment with reclamation in the Western United States at this point looks like a model to emulate or also to some meaningful degree, a cautionary tale about what happens when you heavily manipulate and modify in environments to create a situation that suits the needs of people, but maybe is artificial. Well, what happens when weather conditions change in a shocking way with speed that no one anticipated? Do those modification landscapes still look like a good idea at that point? So, like anything, let's wait five years, right? Five years now with a better idea how and whether the US managed to cope with drastically declining water levels in the Colorado. If there's a, if a good solution is to be found, maybe it becomes a model for elsewhere, but for the moment that's unclear to me.

Mr. Schwartz: Chris. Caitlin, I want to thank you both very much for your time today. Great talking to you about this really critical issue for the United States and for the world. Thanks so much.

Mr. Flavelle: Thank you.

Ms. Welsh: Thanks for joining us, Chris.

Outro: If you enjoyed this podcast, check out our larger suite of CSIS podcasts from into Africa, the Asia Chess Board, China Power AIDS 2020. The Trade Guys, Smart Women Smart Power, and more. You can listen to them all on major streaming platforms like iTunes and Spotify. Visit csis.org/podcasts to see our full catalog.

(END)