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Water is life

Conditions call for conservation

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No, it's not just you. It's hot out there. Hot and dry.

In Utah, a forecast of daytime temperatures that will reach only into the lower 90s is being welcomed as a "cooling trend." There may be a little rain, too. But not enough to make up for the fact that Utah's annual precipitation total is a good 4.3 inches, or more than a quarter of the normal amount, below normal for the year to date. It is a deficit that is very unlikely to be made up before the state's "water year" ends on Sept. 30.

Across the country, daily high temperature records are being shattered and it hasn't been this dry, for this long, for half a century. The federal drought map shows much of the nation, and practically all of the Farm Belt, suffering through drought conditions that range from "moderate" through "severe," "extreme" and all the way up to "exceptional."

Corn and soybean crops are reported to be hit hard, food prices are expected to climb as a result, and farmers and researchers are adjusting to what they fear may be the new normal of weather patterns by breeding both animals and plants that can better tolerate long periods of drought.

These days, most of the corn grown in America is fed, not to people, or even to engines, but to cattle and to chickens. Thus it is the price of meat and milk, not corn flakes, that is expected to rise.

If the situation gets bad enough, American agriculture might rediscover that the greatest utility of cattle throughout human history was that they can eat stuff we cannot — mostly grass — and turn it into food for us. Then we could end the misbegotten practice of feeding all that corn, which we could eat, to cattle.

It is going too far to conclude that the changed climate in any one place is due to global climate change. Weather is too unpredictable for that. But it is only reasonable to assume that climate change is, as some scientists explain, loading the dice so that droughts — or hurricanes — that were once once-in-a-lifetime occurrences will start being twice-in-a-decade events.

The takeaway, for individuals and for nations: Conserve water.

Shift to crops and methods that require less water. Preserve every source we have. In Utah, that means resisting the urge to develop the canyons above Salt Lake City, whence comes much of our water, and fight efforts by Las Vegas and other jurisdictions to ship Utah's water elsewhere.

And it means abandoning wasteful ideas such as the Lake Powell Pipeline.

Water is life. We must treat it as such.

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