1. Libertarian and Communitarian Approach to Water

Due to climate change and mismanagement, the US, especially California is in a state of drought. Without drastic action, many species in the most affected areas may die off. While most agree that our water supply is in a state of crisis, there are various solutions proposed and disagreements over those solutions. On the more drastic end, solutions like water rationing generate much complaints from libertarians and business as this would certainly negatively affect business. But if the government only implements voluntary programs, not enough may be done. Like most problems, there is no, one correct solution. Rather, a multi-pronged approach must be taken consisting of mandatory and voluntary programs, as well as environmental measure meant to safeguard our flora and fauna.

Voluntary measures to curb water use can have an effect. These measures are also the easiest to implement as they do not require any action by Congress or the courts. Sharing information with the public about when is the best time to water lawns, turning of faucets while brushing teeth, taking shorter showers, drain water intensive ponds etc. can help curb excess water usage. The biggest weakness of these group of measures is that they are voluntary. While the some of the public may comply, without any incentives, voluntary measures are least likely to help reduce water usage. However, voluntary measures will also be the most accepted and may even be championed by businesses as a way to seem environmentally responsible. Voluntary water cut back measures should first and foremost be in constant effect as even during rainy years, wasting a vital resource is never a good thing. Voluntary measures will also be the most palatable to libertarians as they are not infringing on anyone’s free will or the market in general. However, communitarians will feel that it isn’t enough. Communitarians will want more proactive measures in order to solve the water crisis as adequate access to water is for the public good.

With a drought comes other problems besides the lack of drinking and irrigation water. With streams and rivers drying up, vital species will need to be transferred to other unaffected areas to ensure their survival. While this is not exactly a solution to the water crisis, by doing so it will mitigate the effects of it. This solution can be relatively quick to employ as congress and the courts do not need to pass any legislation either. With the ongoing drought in California, the department of wildlife has had to transport fish from drying up streams and lakes to other bodies of water. While the protection of vital species is necessary, it will hurt farming interests. For example in the San Joaquin river delta, water to irrigation has been stopped as diverting more would lead to the extinction of the Delta smelt, a species endemic to the area. This stopping of the diversion of river water has been pushed by environmentalists and communitarians as a way of preserving critical species and habitats. However this has led to crop death and loss of profits of farmers who need more water and are willing to pay but can’t. This goes directly against the libertarian viewpoint of a free market.

According to information from the Pat Brown Institute conference, every year, millions of gallons of water are used once and then dumped into streams, ocean or other places. Storm water is also largely wasted as it isn’t collected. By saving this used water and recycling it we can save costs on water as well as be environmentally responsible. While recycled water won’t solve our drinking water problems, it can be used to irrigate crops and used as toilet water. Recycling water is also cheaper and faster than other methods of obtaining water such desalination or digging exploratory ground water wells. While this won’t solve the crisis by itself, it will contribute to any other measures taken. This is also one of the few solutions that communitarians and libertarians can agree on as this solution is not detrimental to the free market in any way.

Water bond measures are another way of raising money to fund projects to conserve water. The recently passed Proposition 1 in California allocates over $7 billion to water conservation. This will allow various water boards and districts to find more ways to save recycle water. This measure would be championed by communitarians as it gives the government power to do more on the issue. However, libertarians would vehemently oppose this as they oppose any increase in government power. Water bond measures are relatively slow to pass as they need to be approved/disapproved by the voters.

Requiring water neutral developments in all future construction projects would also be another way of cutting back on water usage. Construction projects can waste thousands of gallons of water and by cutting back we could reallocate that to farms where need is crucial. This would be a fairly slow solution to implement as it would require a voter measure or introduction of a bill into Congress. It would also be opposed by libertarians who are against the fact that it would hinder some construction projects.

Desalination could also be a solution to the drought. The biggest reason as to why this has not been implemented yet is because it is very expensive. However, it does work in areas around the world that don’t have access to fresh water. This would likely be a last ditch solution as the drought would have to be even more severe than it is now for it to become a viable option. The building of desalination plants by the government would require addition funds from water bonds. Private desalination plants could also be built by utility companies however water prices would dramatically increase at a time when many families are still struggling from the sluggish economy. This solution would be opposed by libertarians, as with other government options, it would give the government more funding and that is contrary to the libertarian principle of a smaller government.

In a worst case scenario, the government can start rationing water. Officials can order the shutdown of all nonessential water usage such as manmade lakes, fountains and public gardens. Water board officials of each county can also determine how much water the county uses and request that much water from the federal government. A series of fines for over usage of water can be implemented to discourage over usage of water. This drastic step would have the most immediate effect in reducing water usage. However, it would be of great detriment to business. Water usage would have to be monitored much more closely. This measure would also be the slowest to implement and encounter the most opposition. Congress would need to implement water rationing. Courts would also need to strike down any inevitable challenges to such a bill.

Overall there is no perfect solution to the water crisis. There is also no plan for solving the water crisis that could possibly placate both sides and still be effective which is why compromise needs to be made. However, with a combination of the above solutions, the water crisis in California and the USA could easily be mitigated if not solved outright.