

New York Times Opinion, Guest Essay,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/26/opinion/arizona-water-colorado-river-saudi-arabia.html>

Arizona Is in a Race to the Bottom of Its Water Wells, With Saudi Arabia's Help

Dec. 26, 2022

By Natalie Koch

Natalie Koch is a professor of geography at Syracuse University and the author of a forthcoming book about the relationship between Arizona and Saudi Arabia.

Arizona's water is running worryingly low. Amid the worst drought in [more than a millennium](#), which has left communities across the state with barren wells, the state is depleting what remains of its precious groundwater. Much of it goes to private companies nearly free, including Saudi Arabia's largest dairy company.

Thanks to fresh scrutiny this year from state politicians, water activists and journalists, the Saudi agricultural giant Almarai has emerged as an unlikely antagonist in the water crisis. The company, through its subsidiary Fondomonte, has been buying and leasing land across western Arizona since 2014. This year The Arizona Republic published a [report](#) showing that the Arizona State Land Department has been leasing 3,500 acres of public land to Almarai for a suspiciously low price.

The case has prompted calls for an investigation into how a foreign company wound up taking the state's dwindling water supplies for a fee that might be as low as one-sixth the market rate. But the focus on the Saudi scheme obscures a more fundamental problem: pumping groundwater in Arizona remains largely unregulated. It's this legal failing that, in part, allows the Saudi company to draw unlimited amounts of water to grow an alfalfa crop that feeds dairy cows 8,000 miles away.

Even if Fondomonte leaves the state, it will be only a matter of time before Arizona sucks its aquifers dry. While a 1980 state law regulates groundwater use in a handful of urban areas, water overuse is common even in these places. The situation is worse in the roughly 80 percent of Arizona's territory that falls outside these regulations. In most of rural Arizona, whoever has the money to drill a well can continue to pump till the very last drop.

Many more agricultural operations are drawing down the state's underground water reserves for free. And most of them are U.S.-owned. Minnesota's Riverview Dairy company, for example, has a farm near Sunizona, Ariz., that has [drained](#) so much of the aquifer that local residents have seen their wells dry up. Meanwhile, some California-based farms, facing tougher groundwater regulations at home, are looking to relocate to neighboring Arizona for cheap water. These companies and other megafarms can afford to drill [deep wells](#), chasing the rapidly sinking water table.

And it's not just farming operations. Other sectors like mining and the military, which have a huge presence in the state, also benefit from Arizona's lax water laws. It's difficult to know how much water is being used up by one of the state's largest employers, Raytheon Missiles and Defense, which, like Almarai, has a footprint in Arizona and Saudi Arabia. But manufacturing missiles has a water cost, too. And like Fondomonte's alfalfa, Raytheon's product is being [shipped](#) to Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi farm scandal may have helped to spotlight the severity of Arizona's water crisis, but the state will have to go further to address the root cause. Arizona needs to apply groundwater pumping regulations across the entire state, not just in its metropolitan areas. It won't be easy. This year special interest groups [scuttled](#) a far more modest effort that would have allowed rural communities to opt in to groundwater enforcement. In all likelihood, when these groups have to pay fair prices for water, they will have to give up on growing water-hungry crops like alfalfa in the desert. This kind of race-to-the-bottom approach to water in Arizona is insupportable today, if it ever was.

Arizona is one of the last places in the United States that should be reckless with its water resources. The state is dependent on the Colorado River, which has been depleted by overuse and climate change and hit extreme lows this year. Water managers from seven states in the river basin failed in August to meet a federal [deadline](#) to make dramatic reductions. As a result, the Bureau of Reclamation [ordered](#) Arizona to cut its use of water from the river by 21 percent. Arizona's cities and rural areas alike are at risk if they lose access to Colorado River water only to find their groundwater reserves sucked dry, too.

In August, Kris Mayes, then a candidate for state attorney general, released [a 16-point plan](#) to stop what it called the "Saudi water grab." Ms. Mayes, who narrowly won the November election (though results of an automatic recount are pending), has some good ideas. In her plan, she promised to seek back payment for Almarai's underpriced water and land usage since 2015, urged support for counties that want to manage their groundwater and said the legislature should update Arizona's water code to prevent overuse in rural areas. But she failed to clearly state the action that it needed: groundwater regulation across the entire state.

A few months after that plan was released, Saudi-U.S. relations [deteriorated](#) after Saudi Arabia announced oil production cuts. "Saudi Arabia has stated their intention to rob Arizonans at the gas pump, but they are already stealing our water," said Representative Ruben Gallego, a Democrat, one of many politicians in the state to take aim at the Saudi agriculture deal.

As a geographer who studies Saudi Arabia's history, I can't help but think about how muddy the lines between victim and victimizer are when I hear this rhetoric. Ironically, American farmers helped kick-start the Saudi dairy industry. In the 1940s the U.S. State Department sent Arizona farmers to Saudi Arabia and coordinated two [Saudi royal visits to Arizona](#) to tout the state's spectacular desert agriculture. The unsustainable alfalfa and dairy enterprise that Saudi Arabia set up in the wake of these visits drained the kingdom's groundwater, sowing the seeds for Saudi companies to look to Arizona for cheap water.

It's a cycle that has to end: Arizona should put a stop to Fondomonte's shady deal, and the sooner the better. But Arizona is not the victim of evil outsiders; it's the victim of its own hubris and political failings that allow such a system to exist. Blaming the Saudis may be a good political play, but the problems won't go away until state lawmakers properly reform Arizona's groundwater laws.

Standing up to special interests tied to Arizona's free-for-all water system won't be as easy as the anti-Saudi saber rattling seen across the state, but it is the step that is needed to prevent Arizona's water crisis from becoming a water catastrophe.

Natalie Koch is a professor in Syracuse University's department of geography and the environment. She is the author of the forthcoming book "Arid Empire: The Entangled Fates of Arizona and Arabia."