

## International News

# Too darn hot as the water leaks away

### New York diary

Oliver Burkeman

New York is sweltering through the worst drought in recent memory. You can tell because they've turned off the fountains in Central Park. And you can tell because they've outlawed the complimentary glasses of water.

It's a well-known fact that you can barely get your knees beneath the table at one of the city's thousands of diners before a vast tumbler of iced tapwater will have been set down in front of you. This frequently impresses first-time visitors to New York from Britain, where one is more accustomed to having to mount long, fierce arguments for tapwater's merits over expensive bottled alternatives. Now, though — under drought regulations introduced by Mayor Michael Bloomberg — the practice is against the law: you should not be served the water unless you request it.

This being New York, that doesn't mean that it happens any less frequently than it did before. And while the dry Central Park fountains may be a mournful sight, the city's parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, was surely indulging in melodrama last week when he called the switching off "almost like wartime rationing".

In fact, the city's drought emergency — which has also prompted a ban on most car-washing and, as it is easy to discover by wandering a little too close to the meatpacking district at the moment, on street-washing, too — is only the beginning of the story. Fifty-three counties in the state of New York are under similar warnings, and the pattern is being repeated across the east coast. Reservoirs normally more than 90% full are down to 60% and below. Thousands of rivers and wells across the country have run dry.

The United States Drought Monitor,

which co-ordinates data on water shortages, has declared that every stretch of the east coast from Georgia to the Canadian border is undergoing a "severe" or "extreme" drought. And the meteorological indications are that things will get worse: these reservoirs are half-empty, not half-full. As Peter Gleick, a water resources expert from the Pacific Institute in California, puts it: "A good spring rain will not solve this problem."

The record-breaking temperatures that roasted New York last week can hardly have helped. At Belvedere Castle, the towering mock medieval edifice in Central Park where the city's official temperature is registered, the 33C recorded on Tuesday last week was approached, as a mid-April high, only by the 31C measured at the same spot 106 years ago. It was, in the words of Cole Porter, too darn hot.

That passed soon enough, replaced last weekend with deafening thunderstorms. But the underlying problem — the drought — did not. And while the reasons behind it may well be partly attributable to climate change, as Mr Gleick argues, something much more mundane is also to blame. The US is suffering from a serious case of leaking pipes.

A report from the Environmental Protection Agency, leaked to the press last week, put the case starkly: the mismatch between actual and required spending on the nation's vast network of pipes, pumps, sewage works and reservoirs, it calculated, equalled tens of billions of dollars; by 2019, if no action is taken, the gap will be \$650bn. It was a chasm that

**The pipes are little better than the hollow logs used by early settlers**



New Yorkers soak up the sun as drought brings water shortages Photograph: Beth A Keiser/AP

an EPA official was happy to describe to reporters as "staggering".

In New York's case experts estimate that by the time water pumped into the city from upstate reaches its destination — as more than a billion gallons does every day — a third as much has already been lost, largely through leaks in the iron pipes that bring it from reservoirs in the Catskill mountains. In some cases they have not been maintained for decades, rendering them little better than the hollow logs used by the first settlers of Manhattan to transport water from wells through the streets to private homes.

A few weeks ago New York authorities announced an expensive plan to use an unmanned submarine to patch holes in the Delaware Aqueduct, which carries more than half the city's water from Catskill reservoirs. It is currently leaking several

million gallons a day, bursting from the surface en route in gushing springs.

It should come as little surprise that New York water has become a question of politics as much as of environmental science. Water consumption, after all, is an index of prosperity, and the history of the US over the past half-century has been an increasingly wet one: more bathrooms per home, ever more powerful showers, more swimming pools and more garden sprayers. Meanwhile, it is argued, the spread of the suburbs — the coating of more and more of semi-rural America with a less permeable layer of asphalt — is keeping water from entering the aquifers that feed the system in the first place. To restrict water use, therefore, is to strike a blow against the cherished ideal of suburban leisure itself.

In New York it's a matter of local

politics, too. Upstate residents complain that they need the water that's diverted in so much volume to the big city, not least because of the mass deaths of fish that some claim are becoming a regular occurrence in near-empty rivers. That so much of it leaks out on the way renders the situation all the more galling.

And there is no more than an 8% chance, the National Climatic Data Centre was reported as announcing last week, that rainfall will heal the situation in most of the worst affected areas by the end of July.

As the shortages persist, the effects will begin to trickle down — if that's not an insensitive metaphor — to the everyday economy. Vegetable and milk prices could rise. Tourists may head for less parched regions. Car-wash attendants could be looking for new jobs. And the Central Park fountains will remain dry for some time.