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America Is Still Running Out of Fresh Water

While we're tens of decades away from a serious shortage, there's some reason to worry now.

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The Rio Grande, which flows from Colorado to the Gulf of Mexico, is one of the most endangered rivers in the world. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)

For much of the last week, policymakers' eyes have been trained overseas, as President Obama tries to convince Congress (and the public) that the country must intervene in Syria. Some of those against a military strike on the region have called on Obama to focus on the issues at home: slow job growth, immigration reform, and the debt ceiling, which is expected to be hit next month.

But there's another, rarely cited domestic issue that will likely be placed on the back burner, along with the others, now that Congress has returned from summer recess. And it's one that, if taken to the extreme, makes a budget-crisis-induced government shutdown seem a little less worrisome.

The United States is running out of fresh water. Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., reminded the public of that at a conference Thursday in Albuquerque, N.M. Udall, who voted no to a resolution authorizing U.S. military intervention that ultimately passed, wants the country

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to focus on such domestic issues. "I don't think this is the time for us to get embroiled in the Syrian civil war," he told NPR on Thursday.

Global water consumption has tripled in the last 50 years. In the United States, the demand for fresh water will exceed the supply by 40 percent by the year 2030, according to a State Department report last year. Water scarcity results from short- and long-term droughts and human activity.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, at least 36 states are faced with local or regional water shortages. In New Mexico, the Rio Grande is on the World Wildlife Fund's list of the top 10 endangered rivers in the world. Last summer, residential wells in the Midwest, from Indiana to Missouri, began drying up, making it difficult to "wash dishes, or fill a coffee urn, even to flush the toilet," The New York Times reported. In Texas, Gov. Rick Perry swore in board members on Wednesday to oversee the divvying up of \$2 billion to finance water projects.

"The danger is clear, and we have to act to protect our way of life in the West," Udall said at the conference. Next week, he will propose what he called a modest amendment, one that would grant \$15 million for water pilot projects nationwide, to a Senate bill on energy efficiency.

Each month, 3.9 trillion gallons of water are consumed in the U.S. For many Americans, the idea that the country might someday run out of fresh water is unfathomable. That possibility is also extremely far off. There is, however, a chance that the country will start feeling some of the effects of a shrinking water supply much sooner. Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a practice that many feel could give the U.S. energy independence, requires millions of gallons of water every day to extract natural gas from the earth. Nearly all of that water is lost.