

Foreword

The balance between supply and demand for water is a delicate one, marked over time by political and environmental conflicts, the impacts of natural disasters and human actions, and the day-to-day demands for a multiplicity of uses for this most vital resource. Although a renewable resource, water is not always available to a thirsty Nation when and where it is needed, nor is it always of suitable quality for the intended use. Water must be considered as a finite resource that has limits and boundaries to its availability and suitability for use.

In the United States, many existing sources of water are being stressed by withdrawals from aquifers and diversions from rivers and reservoirs to meet the needs of homes, cities, farms, and industries. Increasing requirements to leave water in the streams and rivers to meet environmental, fish and wildlife, and recreational needs further complicate the matter. As a Nation, we are using less water. Total water withdrawals during 1995 were 10 percent less than during 1980. This is a significant decline considering that population increased 16 percent during the same period. This decline signals that we are managing our water resources more effectively, that water use does respond to economic and regulatory factors, and that the general public has an enhanced awareness about water-resources and conservation issues.

As planners, managers, and elected officials wrestle with the varied water-management problems facing the Nation at the beginning of the new century, they need consistent information on water supply and use by State and water-use category. This will help the Nation realize the maximum benefit from its water resources and will help strike that crucial balance between supply and demand.

The U.S. Geological Survey has compiled and disseminated estimates of water use for the Nation at 5-year intervals since 1950. In 1977, the Congress expanded the Survey's water-use activities by establishing a National Water-Use Information Program, which, in cooperation with the States, collects reliable and uniform information on the sources, uses, and dispositions of water in the United States. The result of that cooperative effort is a valuable long-term data set of national water-use estimates that can be used to assess the effectiveness of alternative water-management policies, regulations, and conservation activities, and to make projections of future demands. This Circular documents water use in 1995 and identifies changes in water use that have occurred over the past 45 years.

More detailed water-use information is available on our Web site at URL:

<http://water.usgs.gov/public/watuse/>