


Fragmented Flows: Water Supply in Los Angeles County

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Abstract

In the Los Angeles metropolitan region, nearly 100 public and private entities are formally involved in the management and distribution of potable water—a legacy rooted in fragmented urban growth in the area and late 19th century convictions about local control of services. Yet, while policy debates focus on new forms of infrastructure, restructured pricing mechanisms, and other technical fixes, the complex institutional architecture of the present system has received little attention. In this paper, we trace the development of this system, describe its interconnections and disjunctures, and demonstrate the invisibility of water infrastructure in LA in multiple ways—through mapping, statistical analysis, and historical texts. Perverse blessings of past water abundance led to a complex, but less than resilient, system with users accustomed to cheap, easily accessible water. We describe the lack of transparency and accountability in the current system, as well as its shortcomings in building needed new infrastructure and instituting new water rate structures. Adapting to increasing water scarcity and likely droughts must include addressing the architecture of water management.