

Water Is Political Issue

THE public tends to be apathetic about water problems so long as lakes are filled and pipelines flow. Thus the fourth annual Governor's Water Conference held in Tulsa last week could not compete with a series of international crises for attention.

Nevertheless, discussions of how to conserve, distribute and utilize our water resources deserve attention. Water is our most essential resource, since food production depends upon it.

In a special report titled "War Over Water" U.S. News & World Report says, "Unlike showdowns of the frontier era, today's water wars are waged not by cattlemen and sodbusters armed with guns but by lawyers, lobbyists and politicians fighting in courtrooms, legislatures and the halls of Congress."

Strife over water is attributed to the fact that water resources are not always available where needed, rather than to an overall shortage. Nor are funds always available to build needed facilities.

Eastern Oklahoma's surplus water is being sought by western Oklahoma and Texas. In California, excess water in the north is needed in the south. Texas and New Mexico are fighting over water from the Rio Grande and Pecos rivers. South Dakota is pitted against Iowa, Missouri and Nebraska over diversion of water from the Missouri River. And these are only a few of the ongoing conflicts.

These contentions have led to a demand for a "national water policy." To a large extent, national policy is tantamount to

federal control. We have national policies on crime, education, health care and other matters. It might be reasonable to expect "solutions" of comparable feasibility from a water policy.

Since the basic reclamation law was enacted by Congress in 1902, relating to use of water resources in Western states, federal control over water has steadily increased.

The U.S. Corps of Engineers has built and retains control of major lakes, including several in Oklahoma, plus control of the nation's wetlands. The Bureau of Reclamation exercises extensive control in certain areas. The Soil Conservation Service builds dams to save soil and water and to prevent floods, with more than 2,000 having been constructed in Oklahoma. The EPA holds some authority through the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act. Waterways, the Tennessee Valley Authority and parks also are controlled.

When disputes have come to court, federal judges usually have held that federal authority supersedes states' rights. More nearly complete federal control might empower bureaus to determine which cities would receive water for growth and development. Irrigation water allocated to agriculture would enhance favored areas. And decisions could be influenced by political leanings of those involved.

A national policy is not an automatic solution to any problem and does not ensure unity. States should be wary about delegating any more control over resources to federal agencies.