

The Southwest is Swallowing Texas: As grass gives way to desert across the Lone Star State, the nation's fastest growing cities may be left high and dry.

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Scott Olson/Getty Images

The High Plains begin around the 100th meridian. It's where the verdant green of the Gulf of Mexico and Southeastern U.S. gives way to arid scrub, shortgrass and prickly pear cactus – where riders on horseback in the 1800s, nearly a century and a half before satellite mapping, were able to trace the border between these two regions as they split Oklahoma from the Texas Panhandle.

These days, the meridian's more or less paralleled to the east by Interstate 35, a steel-and-concrete vine that connects the Texas cities of Dallas, Fort Worth, San Marcos, Austin and San Antonio. Each ranks among the fastest-growing cities in America, their reservoirs reliably refreshed by rainwater.

Now, however, the border that once followed the 100th meridian – the threshold between lowlands and desert, water abundance and scarcity – is shifting east.

As [climate change pushes the world's temperatures ever higher](#), the desert appears to be expanding, rushing toward the Louisiana border with each drought in a wave of tan and brown, then receding until the next dry spell. And with the region's population [on track to double by 2050](#), the water that nearly 5 million people currently rely on for irrigation, electricity and energy development – not to mention hydration – could soon dwindle, with no grand solution in sight.

"People have this idea that every time they turn on the faucet, water ought to come out of the tap, and they have an idea that that will happen the rest of their life," says Jim Lester, president of the Houston Advanced Research Center, which studies energy and environmental issues. "We had towns in Texas in 2011 where they had to truck in water, they had to distribute it in bottles. If that problem is moving west to east, who's to say that isn't going to happen in Austin next time there's a severe drought?"

"I-35, that's where the crisis is going to hit."

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