

## **IRIS Post-Fieldwork Report 2024**

**Alec Armon, Department of Geography**

With the generous support of IRIS, I was able to begin field research for my Master's thesis in Chile during the summer of 2024. Over two months, I conducted both archival research and semi-structured interviews to investigate the politics of seawater desalination in Chile. My project was focused specifically on a government proposal to construct Chile's first-ever desalination plant that was designed specifically to process water for human consumption -- as opposed to use in mining operations. I set out to better understand why seawater desalination rose to the top of the Chilean government's agenda when it came to addressing protracted drought in the north-central region of Coquimbo, what the possible socio-environmental impacts of building the plant might be, and how the government would face the challenges of distributing this water to the various stakeholders in the region, especially in light of growing demands from the agriculture sector. All of these dynamics play out against the backdrop of a unique policy regime in Chile, under which water has been privatized, commodified, and marketized such that water rights are bought and sold like real estate, and also become speculative assets. This legal framework was established during the Pinochet dictatorship and was codified as the 1981 Water Code, earning Chile the reputation as the most marketized water system in the world.

My summer fieldwork aimed to address the contemporary politics of drought, and in turn seawater desalination, in addition to the historical and legal underpinnings of Chile's water landscape. Therefore, during the first month of my trip, I stayed in the capital, Santiago, where I carried out archival research on the 1981 Water Code at Chile's National Library. Most of the documents I reviewed were legal texts related to the various amendments to the water code over the past few decades or the state of desalination policy in the country. While most of the texts were things I could only access in Chile, I was unable to locate primary source materials like meeting notes or newspaper articles that I was hoping to reference for the project. Nevertheless, my being in the country for an extended period allowed me the flexibility to reach out to a number of the authors whose texts I reviewed in the archives and meet with them to add texture to my interpretations of the archival documents.

The second phase of my fieldwork took place in Coquimbo, the capital city of the Coquimbo region, where the desalination plant is slated for construction and where water scarcity is particularly acute. During my time there, I was able to meet with various government officials who worked on water issues both in the capital and the more rural areas of the region. These interviews served as an indispensable crash course on how Chile's current water system works in practice, contextualizing my understanding of the water code gleaned from the archives. In this time, I gained a much firmer grasp on the complicated patchwork of institutions and organizations that were ultimately in charge of governing existing water resources, as well as what current conflicts and sticking points existed in this political realm. It was much more difficult, however, to get in touch with stakeholders involved with the recently announced desalination project. Many of the folks I talked to mentioned that since an environmental impact assessment had still not been completed, there was not yet much to discuss, and so it seemed that perhaps my project would need to be modified.

Toward the end of my trip, I was able to interview a friend of a friend who was the leader of a local Small-Farmers' Council that was actively tracking the issue of desalination due to the increasing adverse impacts of drought on their livelihoods. With the help of the IRIS funds, I was able to rent a car during this period to drive out to the relatively isolated rural town where this interviewee lived. After our conversations, it became clear that desalination technology was a relatively far-off solution to an extremely urgent issue; for the subsistence farmers who largely lacked political power, the current governance structures that administered the existing water supply were of greater concern. In the last week of my trip, this contact asked on behalf of the Small-Farmers' Council if I would be interested in collaborating with them on a study investigating how water governance in the rural interior of the Coquimbo region was being affected by drought, in hopes of better understanding the ways their organization can advocate for policy change that would improve outcomes for small farmers. Due to the extended construction timeline of the desalination plant and the many relevant findings from my fieldwork up to that point, I accepted their offer, and my summer ended with a new and favorable research trajectory that was the subject of a subsequent fieldwork visit in January of 2025. The trip was crucial in establishing the relationships that now form the foundation of my ongoing research in Chile.