



## RESPONDING TO DROUGHT February 28, 2014

With a history of recurring droughts in California – 40% of recent years have been drought level years – California ought to be well prepared for drought. With so many recent drought years and even worse predicted for the future, California should be managing water as though we were permanently in drought. But that is not the case, and here we are in another declared “drought emergency.” But declaring a “drought emergency” does force us to focus on water use and allows us to get the public’s attention that would otherwise be elsewhere. The sense of urgency that goes along with this “emergency” presents an opportunity to implement permanent changes that will provide a more sustainable use of our most precious resource. “The current drought opens the door to a real conversation about fundamental changes in California water policy” according to Peter Gleick, President of the Pacific Institute.

The current “drought emergency” is directly attributable to state and federal agencies’ orientation to gamble with nature and to release water to their customers rather than to hold enough water in storage reserve when faced with a 40% probability of low water in the next year. The major orientation of the CVP and the SWP has always been to protect exporters rather than to protect water quality, fisheries, water reserves, and the overall California economy. Maximizing exports is not the same as minimizing risk to interruption of water supplies from drought. The cycle of low reserves in the reservoirs, which has been repeated since these projects were built, needs to change. This translates into higher reserves in northern reservoirs in all years in view of that 40% probability of low water in the next year. This will be a major change in CVP and SWP operations, but must be tackled in order to avoid the mistakes of the current operating philosophy, which are so obvious this year.

By not planning for drought or dry times which are inevitable with climate change, California is exacerbating battles between different water interests. There are EWC solutions that will make us drought proof and which will need coordination from agencies and major structural changes on how we operate our water systems while preserving our groundwater, our environment, and fisheries.

Drought conditions highlight a major public health and safety issue for California’s poor or isolated communities which lack drinking water. High priority actions are needed at the state and local level to assure water supplies to those communities.

## PRINCIPLES

Our response to drought should be guided by a set of principles that are in accord with our normal sustainability-based advocacy. Those principles include:

- Recognizing scarcity as the “new normal” for water use
- Maintaining the integrity of Federal and California Endangered Species Acts
- Maintaining Wild and Scenic Status for designated rivers
- Maintaining existing water restoration projects
- Maintaining acceptable water quality standards
- Maintaining priorities for senior and urban water rights
- Assure agency actions that protect northern reservoir reserves in order to avoid or minimize the effects of drought conditions.
- Provide adequate water supplies and water quality to disadvantaged communities
- Upholding public trust protections for California’s water bodies
- Utilizing water pricing as a mechanism for moving California to more sustainable use of water.
- Avoiding unsustainable water measures disguised as emergency drought responses
- New conveyance is not needed if these drought principles and the following actions are implemented. The costs are too high, and the risk to fisheries, habitats, and water quality are unpredictable."
- More surface storage is not a solution to drought because of the unpredictability of future supply to either fill or operate the dams.

## ACTIONS

Our actions should be both advocacy and media oriented that prescribe the following:

- Work with state and federal agencies to assure protections for endangered species and to provide water flows that will avoid further species declines during drought periods.
- The Department of Water Resources should develop a statewide inventory of communities with water supplies at risk and target appropriate funding to the identified communities. Funding is available through a USDA program that targets rural and small communities in developing emergency water supplies during the drought. Recent legislation has identified 10 communities in need and designated \$15 million for relief; out of a \$687 million package, California could do better.
- Implement federal, state, and local or regional funding and mandatory programs for urban and agricultural efficiencies and conservation. This would include measures such as incentives to purchase high efficiency toilets, clothes washers and dishwashers, storm water capture, urban landscape replacement, groundwater remediation, waste water treatment and recycling, green water infrastructure, higher technology farm irrigation practices and equipment, and farm soil protection measures.
- Develop water pricing guidelines to incentivize reduced use of urban and agricultural water. The use of baseline measures with a steep upward price escalation for usage above the baseline has been proven effective in controlling water usage.

- Report and monitor groundwater usage in order to minimize groundwater overdraft. California is the only major state that does not monitor or control its groundwater and is a large part of the reason that numerous groundwater aquifers throughout the state are continuously overdrawn.
- Develop water pricing that incentivizes planting of crops which provide more sustainability for California's limited water supplies. As we reach the limits of our water supply, questioning the use of that valuable resource for thirsty crops such as almonds and pistachios, which are generally export crops, may not be the best use of that water except for the farming corporations that profit from it.
- Develop short range and long range water district targets for per capita use of water. California's overall per capita water use, although very variable, is in the three figures, while countries such as Israel and Australia with similar climates have per capita usage that is in the two figure level. California needs to make significant reductions in per capita water use through the implementation of the other actions outlined in this paper.
- Implement staged reduction of exports from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay Delta over a multi-year period to a level of 3 million acre feet maximum in most years. The Environmental Water Caucus Responsible Exports Plan recommends reducing exports to this level with compensating actions such as the conservation and demand reduction measures shown above, and retirement of impaired farmlands in the San Joaquin Valley, which can be repurposed as solar farms.
- Revise CVP and SWP contract allocations to a more sustainable yield. The "paper water" phenomena built into these contracts has been a large part of the California water wars and the contracts need to reflect the known reality of existing water supply levels.
- Operate major dams with a larger reserve held back for the 40% of low water years that can be anticipated. The major orientation of dam operations should be to protect water quality, drinking water, fisheries, and habitats.
- Current and future proposals in congress to authorize more surface storage as part of drought legislation should be abandoned.
- Reverse the Monterey Agreement which would restore the urban preference, eliminate paper water for the State Water Project, and return the Kern Water Bank to public ownership. These steps would further reduce the "paper water" phenomena and avoid a public trust resource such as water to be used strictly for profit generation.
- Restrict the use of water for fracking oil and natural gas. The limitations of our water supply require that we should not be using that water for a completely new industry which will place increased demands on the limited water supply and contribute to further development of greenhouse gas producing energy.
- Assure that adequate water supplies are provided to disadvantaged communities and that the water quality for poorer communities meets healthy standards. Small disadvantaged communities throughout California lack access to safe, clean, and affordable water supplies, and significant resources must be allocated to address that need. Too many smaller and poorer communities do not have these necessities, especially in farming areas and must not be overlooked in planning for drought conditions. The current versions of both SB 848 and AB 1331 contain

appropriate language to ensure that the water and sanitation needs of California's most vulnerable communities are met.

All of the above actions are intended to move California communities, individuals, and farms to a more sustainable level of water usage and away from our oversubscribed water practices. The conservation and water efficiency actions highlighted above have been shown to be cost effective, and on a statewide level, can produce "new water" (recycling) or reduce demand by millions of acre feet. They also need to be mandatory, not voluntary as many are currently, and they need to be a permanent and structural part of California water policy during both normal and drought times.

Our case is helped by a receptive media that has started a drumbeat of articles about drought threats and possible solutions. We can help our own cause by drafting editorials and blogs and by responding with comments to the media. We have never had a better opportunity to make our case. On the other hand, water districts and politicians who support more surface storage are using these drought conditions as their drumbeat to advocate for more dams, as if that would magically produce more rain.

It should also be noted that many of the above actions fit exactly with the EWC's Responsible Exports Plan, which says a lot about the viability of the EWC plan.