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Guest Opinion: State needs to unite for more water storage

By John Kingsbury Aug 11, 2016

As most of California recovers from this historical drought, one thing we can count on is that history will repeat itself. Californians can take full credit for willingly sacrificing landscape and adjusting habits to save water supply for another year. Toilets have been replaced, lawns have been converted to plastic, leaks have been fixed, prime agricultural land has been fallowed, and we have learned to be more efficient with our water supply.

So, fast-forward to the next drought. What's next?


There are powerful environmental activists that support dam removal, oppose new and expanded surface storage, and are demanding permanent and more strenuous conservation restrictions, both on indoor use and outdoor irrigation, as well as more water cutbacks on agriculture. Unfortunately, this environmental movement is a myopic approach that ignores the statewide efforts to improve the state's integrated water system.

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California's complex water system was built in the 1960s for a different time, hydrology and population. The climate has been warming. By 2050, conservative estimates are that we will lose 25 percent to 40 percent of the Sierra snowpack, the state's largest winter reservoir. Meanwhile, the population has more than doubled since the state and federal water projects were constructed. In 1960, there were 15.8 million people in California; now there are about 36 million people in the state. Some experts predict more than 60 million people in the state by 2050.

Significant to California is the water stored in reservoirs behind dams. These dams, built decades ago, have dedicated in-stream flow releases designed to meet many beneficial uses of the environment, agriculture and urban needs. Let's not forget flood control. As the planet warms, more precipitation will land in the Sierra Nevada in the form of rain rather than snow. Rain that is not absorbed by the forest floor moves unimpeded through the watershed, breaching dams, causing valley flooding and pressure on the Delta levee system before the water is wasted to the sea, all because California does not have adequate storage facilities to capture excess winter flows.

It has not been since Gov. Edmund G. Brown's vision to build a statewide water system for California and President John F. Kennedy's famous speech in 1962 at the site of San Luis Reservoir that the people of this state have been this united in preparing a path for the future. San Luis Reservoir,

completed in 1967, can hold up to 2 million acre feet or 652-billion gallons of water and is the largest off-stream reservoir in the United States.

Now, half a century later, most Californians are again united. In 2014, California voters overwhelmingly supported a water bond as a start to pave the way for the future. The water bond includes \$2.7 billion to support the construction of surface water storage and \$810 million to improve water security, provide for drought preparedness and mitigate the effects of climate change.

There are several well-known surface-water storage projects under consideration: raising Shasta Dam on the Sacramento River, constructing Sites Reservoir and Temperance Flat, and expanding Los Vaqueros and San Luis Reservoirs. There are also potential water-storage projects with regional and statewide public

benefits in Calaveras County, including the Blagen Mill Pond Restoration Project and the Wilson Lake Rehabilitation and Meadow Restoration Plan.

Additional surface-water storage reduces ground water extraction and subsidence in the Delta by using surface water during wet years and the groundwater basin during dry years. Additional storage provides for new urban and municipal uses, drought preparedness, flood protection and recreational opportunities. Surface water stored behind dams provides cold water for endangered fish, such as steelhead trout and salmon. Water released from reservoirs helps balance the wind and solar electricity grid by generating carbon-free renewable hydropower energy. As the population grows, so must California water-for-food production, unless we are content with our children and grandchildren subsisting on two meals a day or food from Third World countries.

It is time for more water storage to help pave the way to a prosperous future for California. Unless we have the fortitude to increase surface-water storage as the voters have called for, we will continue to ration the half-full glass of water. We should reflect on the vision of Brown and the words of Kennedy: "Progress represents the combined will of the American people, and only when they are joined together for action, instead of standing still and thinking that everything that had to be done has been done. It's only when they join together in a forward movement that this country moves ahead and that we prepare the way for those who come after us."

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