

CALAVERAS ENTERPRISE

A wakeup call comes to the Sierra

By John Kingsbury Guest Opinion

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Recently, the Mountain Counties Water Resources Association (MCWRA) held a historic regional water symposium for its membership.

While MCWRA has hosted many regional water programs in the past five years, never has MCWRA hosted a regional water symposium that included two United States congressmen, three California state senators and one California Assembly member under the same roof at the same time. Never has there been such a significant presence of county supervisors from the mountain counties area.

It was a distinct honor and privilege that our representatives all attended to offer their views and perspectives on the regional and Northern California water challenges and opportunities with the new Trump administration.

The regional and statewide water challenges are as significant as they are many. For example, and of high significance:

- **Watershed management** – The increasing incidence of major wildland fires in the Sierra Nevada is a threat to the water supply and downstream water quality. The sediment reduces the storage capacity of California's reservoirs, reduces the cold-water pools for fish, accelerates water movement creating flooding downstream and puts further pressure on the levee system in the Delta. Lack of federal funding, environmental impediments and watershed management has

created this unhealthy environment for the state's largest winter reservoir, the Sierra Nevada. The overstocked forest and the dead, dying trees are unprecedented. Building biomass plants is one tool to promote healthier forests by providing an outlet for removal of overgrowth and of dead trees.

There should also be significant state and federal investment in the state's natural infrastructure, being the Sierra Nevada headwaters, to sustain healthy forests and foothills, ecosystems and high-quality water resources that Californians have come to depend upon.

- **Water storage** – Much has been written and promoted about the need for more water storage. It is appalling to see millions of gallons of fresh water flowing to the sea. There should be significant infrastructure investment in new water storage. This fresh water should be stored in reservoirs, sequestered in the Sierra and injected into the groundwater basins to provide for multiple smart uses later.

- **Water quality** – There are very real water quality issues in the Delta, yet environmental groups and regulators want to squeeze valuable water resources from agriculture and rural and urban communities so there is more fresh water to dilute the toxins in the river system. This is a waste and an unreasonable use of our finite water supply. The state should use Proposition 1 funding approved by the voters in 2014 and fix the water quality problems upstream.

- **Unimpaired flow** – Environmental groups and regulators want more flow for fish in the Delta, yet ignore funding and fixing the other stressors in the Delta. There is little food and cover for the endangered fish. A juvenile endangered fish has little chance at survival from predators. Striped bass limits and size limits have created an incubator for predators near the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin river systems and elsewhere in the Delta.

- **Altered Delta** – Decades of Delta alterations and sea level rise demand more fresh water to fight Mother Nature and salt from intruding too far upstream. Adjustments must be made in the Delta. If sea rise is not properly addressed in the Delta, that additional demand for fresh water will come from Northern California and the mountain counties' tributaries.

- **Water rights and local control** – Forthcoming is loss of local control for water managers and their communities. There is a movement to unravel historical area-of-origin water rights protections (the water rights priority system) and mandate, either by legislative or regulatory design, the implementation of permanent water conservation rationing. These longstanding state assurances are paramount to this region's quality of life and should be honored unequivocally such that no state and/or federal agency exerts regulatory authority to hinder or reallocate area-of-origin and/or watershed-of-origin water supplies that harms the communities and ecosystems in the mountain counties area.

- **Emergency drought** – The drought is over, yet regulators hold rein on authority and power over regional water districts and communities only to compound their challenges. Reduced revenue from rationing forces water districts to raise water rates on communities and ratepayers who can't afford it. Revenue that should go to replace and repair aging infrastructure goes to fund operating costs.

- **Public goods charge** – There is movement to impose what is being called a public goods charge on water. This would be a state mandate for water districts to impose surcharges on bills. That money should go to replace water districts' aging infrastructure. My money says it goes to Sacramento, never to return. This means a loss of local control and raised rates.

- **Water rationing** – Water districts are required by Proposition 218 to charge their ratepayers the cost to provide service, which is what they do. Look for the state to change that to penalize water districts if they miss those water rationing targets the state hopes to impose again, either legislatively or through regulation. Once the indoor and outdoor household water use targets have been established, it will be easy for the regulators and Legislature to get out the ratchet and raise those targets to become standards. This is a direct hit on water rights.

There is a grand scheme being played out and orchestrated in Sacramento that will affect this region's long-term water reliability and the quality of life of those here now and those who desire to come to this region.

Wake up, mountain counties and Northern California. It is, or should be, the responsibility of everyone who lives, works and recreates in this region and Northern California to set aside personal agendas and ideologies. It is crucial that we have the collective wisdom, vision and commitment to do our part, which should be to present solutions and not complaints or problems. It is imperative that we rally around and support our local, state and federal representatives in this effort. Only by setting aside differences and working with our representatives to implement comprehensive water management solutions will this region have any chance to achieve long-term water reliability for the foreseeable future.

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