



Guest Commentary: Are we trying to thrive or survive?

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As California recovers from the drought, it is troubling that there is push by certain interest groups to establish permanent water conservation regulations beyond this emergency. It seems like these groups are focused more on their ideology or political agenda than on the real impacts that such a permanent “state of emergency” will have on other people’s lives and livelihoods.



Obviously a “one size fits all” blanket approach solution in California does not work. Whether you live in the rural mountain or coastal communities, the Sacramento San Joaquin Delta, southern California, or in an apartment high rise with a potted plant for landscape, we live in these areas for diverse socioeconomic reasons, sometimes by necessity, and often for a certain quality of life. As such, people should not be governed by the same regulations and be expected to thrive. People have different needs depending on where they live as do the varied ecosystems.

For example, the mandated conservation regulations did not work for those with very senior water rights in the mountain counties. Mandated conservation in the mountain counties area were often unjustified by water shortage, and so it functioned as a backdoor to allow a junior water right to take from a senior water right. Many very senior, area-of-origin senior water right holders were assigned stringent conservation mandates while junior right holders well downstream in urban areas were asked to much less. Someone looking to overturn the priority principle of California water rights could hardly have designed a cleverer takings strategy.

Mandated urban conservation does not equal water use efficiency. Brown lawns are not a sign of efficiency; they are a sign of rationing. California should use the term conservation when there is a drought, broken water line, tank out, water quality issue, or other emergency, but not as a permanent term. Over time, the term conservation will lose its effectiveness. People will be hesitant to respond effectively in the next emergency or unable to, if efficiency measures have hardened their water demands to the breaking point.

The state would greatly benefit from a more strategic and holistic approach to ecosystem management. It is important to note that water in rural environment, unlike urban environments, account for and promote open spaces, wildlife habitat, locally grown healthy food from small farm agriculture, carbon-free renewable hydropower energy, and support significant recreation and tourism not only from California, but from around the world. These are socio-economic drivers that define rural communities and differentiate urban environments from rural environments.

One of the lessons learned from the drought is that the state was unprepared to deal with the value of wildlife and environment in this region. The imposition broad-brush conservation robbed the environment and wildlife of water classified as “urban use”. Unlike coastal urban areas, all the water in the mountain counties region, both indoors and outdoors not used by people or the environmental needs of wildlife, landscape, and soil, moves down into the streams and creeks, provides beneficial uses to the valley floor, and replenishes the ground water aquifers. The people and environment in this region are knitted together. Unless intelligently crafted, conservation measures can harm to the environment, the regions unique ecosystem, and the resident’s quality of life.

In order for all living things to exist and to thrive, long-term water management requires a comprehensive, integrated strategy. The state and federal government must partner with other public and private organizations and effectively invest and implement long-term water management decisions. We need to advance the stewardship of our watershed to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire, recover lost storage due to sediment displacement, increase the water carrying capacity by thinning forests, and slow down the water to give it time to percolate into the soil. The forest floor is our natural plumbing system and it should work effectively.

There are several long-term surface water projects on the table that will increase water supply, but they are a decade or two away from final construction, if even that. The State should concurrently focus on and implement short-term regional water supply projects. The short-term regional projects will enhance water supply reliability for the near-term, reduce impacts of the next drought shortage, augment the state’s long-term water supply efforts, and are at less cost.

Lastly, fix the “problems” in the Delta. More fresh water flushed through the Golden Gate year after year won’t fix the problems in the Delta, nor does give the fish a place to hide and thrive. Sadly, flushing all this water to the ocean, year after year, has shown no measurable ecosystem benefits. Instead this practice has resulted in a monumental waste of water. The flipside is that if this practice continues, California residents will be forced to endure permanent conservation measures, brown lawns, 5-minute showers, and future water rations, while vast quantities of fresh water continues to flow to the ocean.