

Californians willing to save water, poll finds

Kelly Zito, San Francisco Chronicle, 6-3-10

The incessant rain all winter and spring did not convince California residents that there will be enough water to go around in the future, according to a statewide poll released Wednesday.

Most Californians are, in fact, willing to alter their daily habits and drastically cut consumption in an effort to ward off what they expect to be severe, long-term water shortages.

The findings were part of an effort by the state and a group of water agencies to gauge the public's attitudes on conservation as California moves to slice urban water use one-fifth by 2020.

"The notion that we need to conserve isn't something that comes and goes with time. ... It's something Californians believe to be an article of faith and that they're strongly committed to doing something about," said Dave Metz, whose firm conducted the survey on behalf of the state Department of Water Resources and the Association of California Water Agencies.

Eighty one percent of the 1,200 California residents who participated in a phone survey in May believe the state faces chronic water shortfalls and 94 percent agree that the state must conserve more water.

The results showed little change compared with a similar study last year, despite recent heavy rain and snow that filled up reservoirs, brought relief to parched orchards and fields and boosted the state's overall water supply.

Metz's research found a majority of Californians consistently rate themselves "somewhat" to "very" willing to change the way they use water, from brushing teeth and shaving with the faucet off, to fixing plumbing leaks and outfitting hoses with automatic shutoffs.

It is not clear, however, whether those shortcuts will be enough to de-stress the water system and achieve the 20 percent cut for city dwellers in 10 years mandated by the Legislature last year and signed by the governor.

State water managers have been juggling the needs of cities, farmers and crashing fish populations amid failing infrastructure and changing climate.

Some regions appear better at doing more with less. Daily water use per person in the Bay Area, North Coast and Central Coast, hovers not far above 150 gallons. The average is nearly double that in large swaths of the state, including the Central Valley and Inland Empire.

The Department of Water Resources used Wednesday's study as an excuse to re-launch its "Save our Water" ad campaign featuring video clips of "average" Californians doing their part to trim water demand.

"Save Our Water isn't about drought - it's about long-term education and long-term changes in Californians' behavior," said department director Mark Cowin. "Californians can't act as though water is an unlimited resource."

Still, experts worry that another wet year or two might cause the same people who are pledging to watch every drop to revert to dousing their lawns and singing long songs in the shower.

"Californians are notoriously fickle about their water system," said UC Davis watershed scientist Jeffrey Mount.
"The flood memory half-life and drought memory half-life in California is very short."