

California's water flow squandered

Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee, 4-3-11

Those who really believe California has a water shortage should spend five minutes standing in Old Sacramento, watching the Sacramento River.

Operators of the three major dams on the Sacramento and its tributaries – Shasta, Oroville and Folsom – have opened their gates widely, sending boiling torrents of water downstream. They must draw down reservoirs behind the dams to control anticipated runoff from one of the heaviest mountain snowpacks on record.

A week ago, Sacramento River flows hit 90,000 cubic feet per second, even with diversions into bypass channels. But on Friday, the flow was about 75,000 cfs, which meant that someone watching the river for five minutes at Old Sacramento would see nearly 170 million gallons of water – enough flow to fill an empty Folsom Lake in less than a week.

Let's put that in another context. The difference between California's having an adequate water supply and an inadequate supply is roughly 3 million acre-feet of water a year. That's the equivalent of just 20 days of current Sacramento River flow.

In a rational world, the extra flows in this and other high-water seasons would be diverted into what's called "off-stream storage," either into underground aquifers or into reservoirs such as San Luis Reservoir on the Pacheco Pass between Los Banos and Hollister.

However, San Luis, which holds more than 2 million acre-feet, is already full to the brim, and Southern California reservoirs are nearly full.

State water authorities have long called for more off-stream storage to capture high flows. For instance, had the proposed Sites reservoir in western Colusa County been built years ago, as it should have been, it would be absorbing another 2 million acre-feet of water for use in drought years and to stabilize flows on the Sacramento River.

If global warming has the widely predicted effect of reducing snowfall and increasing rain, off-stream storage will become even more critical. But Sites, like other aspects of California water policy, has been tied up in political stalemate for decades. It's not a conflict over water, but rather one of competing visions of how California should develop as it gains population in the 21st century.

Those who prefer high-density urban growth, rather than low-density suburbs, believe that restricting water supplies will help their cause. They don't, in other words, want Californians to have an abundant water supply for both agricultural and non-farm uses.

Jerry Brown – who championed water supply improvements during his first governorship – indicates that he will make them a priority if and when the budget crisis is resolved.

A good first step would be to assemble the Legislature in Old Sacramento and compel its members to watch a squandered opportunity flow to the sea.