

# Water, water everywhere, but not enough is saved

*In state water policy, there are too many word games, not enough water works*

**George Skelton, Los Angeles Times, 4-4-11**

SACRAMENTO -- Government water managers cringe at the word "drought." But there are two words that they dread even more: "drought over."

A drought forces the government to reduce water deliveries. That agitates farmers and urban gardeners. But at the same time, politicians and bureaucrats gain an opportunity to make a strong case for building more waterworks, especially dams.

Parching droughts and killer floods: They're proven motivators that whip up public support for big water projects.

It's understandable, therefore, that a state government would be very hesitant to take down the drought sign.

That came to mind last week as Gov. Jerry Brown finally formally acknowledged what was obvious to everyone: California's drought had ended.

For weeks, it had been pouring enough to float an ark.

OK, maybe I am a bit cynical. Perhaps I've watched "Chinatown" too many times. In this classic 1974 film, L.A. officials fake a drought in the San Fernando Valley in order to generate public support for a bond issue that will finance construction of a dam and an aqueduct and make a developer even richer.

The flick is fiction but close enough to sordid history — excluding the murder and mayhem — that it should be required viewing for every Californian.

I'm not saying anyone in Sacramento faked the recent so-called drought. But the D-word was grossly abused.

My Webster's defines drought as "a period of dryness, especially, when prolonged...."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, as he was trying to prod the Legislature into passing a water bond, officially declared the drought in June 2008 after a season of average snowfall in the Sierra. (Actually, the real drought had occurred the year before, when the Sierra snowpack on April 1 was only 39% of normal.)

Schwarzenegger's drought designation — which facilitated water transfers from haves to have-nots — stayed in effect through succeeding years of 83% and 104% spring snow packs, hardly meeting Webster's definition.

Certainly there was a court-caused drought, of sorts. Federal judges, trying to preserve the endangered tiny delta smelt and declining Chinook salmon, tightened the valve on San Joaquin Valley irrigation. It must have helped the salmon. They're roaring back.

The delta, where the snow-fed Sacramento and San Joaquin river drainages converge, is the largest estuary on the west coast of the Americas. It's also California's main water hub, the source of drinking water for 24 million

people and irrigation for 3 million acres.

Finally last week, the drought tag no longer could hold water. State hydrologists measured the Sierra snowpack at 165% of normal, the deepest in 16 years.

"Official pronouncements on drought always seem to lag common sense by about three to six months," says Keith Coolidge, spokesman for the Delta Stewardship Council, a recently created entity that will design a more reliable and fish-friendlier system for delivering water south.

Let's put it this way: One day last week, the Sacramento River system, including overflow into bypasses, was producing roughly 180,000 cubic feet of water per second. That's the size equivalent of 180,000 basketballs rolling by each second. Put another way, it's around four acre-feet — enough water to supply four families of four for a year — tumbling past Sacramento each second.

All this water was rolling through the delta into San Francisco Bay and under the Golden Gate to the sea.

Why doesn't someone capture the precious bounty for use when an inevitable drought returns?

"We could if we had a place to put it and a way to get it there," says Maury Roos, the state's veteran chief hydrologist.

Coolidge says, "Here it was raining cats and dogs with a lot of water moving through the delta, but the pumps were shut off because the reservoirs were full. There needs to be additional storage south of the delta. The drought's over and a lot of water is flowing and we still can't make full use of it."

And that makes the tired, traditional lecture at the end of every drought really rather offensive. It's this boilerplate admonition that the governor repeated last week: "It's critical that Californians continue to watch their water use. Drought or no drought, demand for water in California always outstrips supply. Continued conservation is key."

Huh? And do exactly what with the conserved water? Stash it in the Pacific? Better that everyone wash the car and driveway.

There hasn't been a major dam built in California since the federal government constructed New Melones east of Modesto 32 years ago.

There has been talk of the state's possibly building an off-stream reservoir — called Sites — in Colusa County to drain surplus water off the Sacramento River to help control flooding. Then the water could be released later for environmental and irrigation uses. There's also discussion of building another dam on the San Joaquin River near Fresno.

Schwarzenegger and the Legislature included some money for dams plus a delta overhaul and other worthwhile water endeavors in a proposed \$11.1-billion bond two years ago. Unfortunately, the bond also got larded up with pork: bike trails, nature centers and the like.

The bond is scheduled to be offered voters next year. But they're unlikely to digest it with all that fatty pork.

"It would be huge uphill fight, especially given the fact we're still going to be in bad shape financially," says

Assemblyman Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael), chairman of the water committee.

"And there's probably not going to be a drought. The drought was one factor why folks thought the bond might pass."

But a drought is always easy to declare, just difficult to end.