

Current water policies all wet, book says

Author: New thinking needed to meet demand

Zeke Barlow, Ventura County Star, 2-24-11

To avert the many looming crises facing California's fragile water supply, a new book makes the case for a drastic change in the way the state views and allocates water.

A new government structure, increased water conservation and new environmental strategies are needed to deal with loss of endangered species, loss of water supply, contamination of water, and massive floods, the authors write.

That new way of thinking will involve shifting the focus from water for agriculture, and will require higher water rates to pay for projects to ensure a safe, reliable water supply, according to a book released Wednesday by the Public Policy Institute of California titled "Managing California's Water: From Conflict to Reconciliation."

"Our assessment of the current situation is bleak," said co-author Ellen Hanak. "The current policies are insufficient to meet our current water supply, water reliability or quality, or to maintain ecosystem health."

The new focus would not be simple or without controversy, the authors said.

Part of the new strategy involves making water deliveries from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to Central and Southern California less centered on agriculture because the industry is not the economic engine it once was.

Another part acknowledges it is highly likely that despite best efforts, some fish species in the Delta will likely become extinct in the coming decades.

Among the changes the authors say are needed:

- ◆ No longer managing the water systems for one species like the endangered delta smelt or coho salmon that have caused so much disruption in recent years because of pumping restrictions. Instead, look at preserving the entire ecosystem where not just endangered species but all species can thrive. Levees would need to be moved and dams torn down.
- ◆ Move away from relying on massive new infrastructure projects to move and store water. Focus on increased conservation — as much as 30 percent less water use than in 2000 — as well as storing more water underground and making farmers' ability to sell water rights easier. Selling water rights could be more profitable for farmers than farming itself and would increase the water supply. Such a shift would not drastically alter the food supply, the authors said.
- ◆ Better flood management, which would mean encouraging cities not to build in floodplains, and increasing the area where residents would be required to buy flood insurance.
- ◆ Treat water as a public commodity, making it easier to buy and sell. Also, make groundwater a priority as a way to bolster resources. A fee should be placed on water to fund needed projects, enabling water managers to move away from relying on bonds and ever-shrinking state funds.

◆ Create a new governing system to manage the complex network of water agencies that often have competing and divergent interests.

The proposed changes will not be easy, cheap or politically popular, said Jay Lund, co-author of the book and director of the UC Davis Center for Watershed Sciences.

"A lot of noses will get pushed out of joint, but that is how it happens," Lund said.

The cost of water, which has been relatively inexpensive for years, will likely increase greatly over the next few decades as ratepayers bear the burden, Hanak said.

"If what you are talking about is ensuring the water users of California a sustainable and reliable and high-quality water supply in the future, it should be the people who are using it paying for it," she said.

And conservation must increase. California now uses much more water than other developed countries in similar climates, such as Spain, Australia and Italy.

Locally, users have greatly reduced consumption in recent years, said Eric Bergh, resource manager for the Calleguas Municipal Water District, which sells imported water to Ventura County. Since July, users have consumed about 28 percent less when compared with 2004-06.

Lund said that without making hard changes, it will only be a matter of time before a water crisis unfolds — born of endangered species, floods, earthquakes or supply issues.

He acknowledged that sometimes it takes an immediate crisis for people to act.

"If I were a betting man," he said, "most likely we will fail into a solution."