

# California must boost water storage

**Bay Area News Group, 10-6-11**

There's nothing like a couple of wet years to dampen arguments that environmental protection regulations are depleting water supplies needed by agricultural and urban users.

A record 6.5 million acre-feet has been pumped from the Delta this year, mostly to Central Valley farms and Southern California. That is enough to serve the state's entire population for a year and a half.

Much of the water went to refill water banks and reservoirs, which were depleted during the dry years from 2007 through 2009.

It was the three-year drought, not environmental rules, that resulted in water pumping reductions to the dismay of farmers, who blamed what they believed were overly strict pumping regulations to protect fish and wildlife.

Even with all the record pumping this year, millions of acre-feet of water went out to sea. In one period earlier this year, 3 million acre-feet of fresh water flowed to the sea in just 10 days.

That is the amount of water that makes the difference between California having an adequate water supply and an insufficient one.

If California's annual rain and snowfall were similar to those of the past couple of years, there would be far fewer problems with meeting everyone's needs. But that is not the case.

Precipitation amounts vary widely from year to year, and it is not uncommon to have a two- or even three-year drought.

However, such droughts would not diminish needed water supplies if California had greater storage capacity in aquifers and aboveground reservoirs.

If California builds two new reservoirs at Sites and Temperance Flat, which could be financed by a water bond passed by the Legislature that is scheduled to go before the voters in 2012, another 2 million acre-feet of water would be available.

That water supply could be used for agriculture, urban areas and additional flows into the Delta for fish during the dry season. Sending water into reservoirs also would ease the pressure on Delta levees, many of which need repair and are in danger of breaking.

Unfortunately, California has not built a large reservoir in more than a generation, despite huge increases in population. Conservation is essential, but it is not enough to solve the state's water needs. Greater storage capacity is also essential and should be seen primarily as a means of providing sufficient fresh water flows into the Delta in dry periods without undue harm to urban and agricultural users.

It is dismaying that the obvious need for more downstream water storage in reservoirs and aquifers has been delayed for decades, often because of disputes on land-use policy.

While decisions on growth should be linked to water supply, there is no good reason not to construct more water storage. It's good for all users, the environment and flood control.

When the next drought arrives, heated arguments about water use and scarce supplies will arise again. That would not be the case if the state had been able to capture and store more of the additional water that flowed to the sea this year.