

# Californians split on lifting fish protections for more water

**Anne C. Mulkern, Environment & Energy Publishing, 4-17-14**

Californians overwhelmingly believe the state is suffering a water shortage but disagree about whether to ease environmental rules to increase supplies, a poll said yesterday.

In a Field Poll survey, 88 percent of the Golden State's registered voters agreed that there is a lack of water, with 60 percent saying the shortage is "extremely serious."

The poll asked voters whether they agreed or disagreed that "in dry years the state should be allowed to bypass environmental regulations protecting fish and the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta region if residents or farmers face serious shortages."

The polling group posed that same question during an opinion survey in 1987, when there also was a drought. Today's California voters were divided, as they were in 1987. In the latest survey, 49 percent said that the state should bypass environmental regulations during extreme drought, while 44 percent disagreed. In 1987, voter opinions were split 47 percent on each side.

The Field Poll questioned 1,000 registered voters March 18-April 5. The results had a 3.2-point margin of error.

The survey findings arrive as state and federal lawmakers offering varying solutions to address drought and prevent future ones.

Last week, state officials released a drought plan that proposed waiving water quality rules and environmental protections for endangered fish in California for several months this year to deal with the lingering drought.

In February, the U.S. House passed H.R. 3964, which would lift environmental protections for fish in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta in order to deliver more water to Central Valley farms. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) criticized that bill but along with other senators offered a relief measure that targets some fish safeguards.

Feinstein's "Emergency Drought Relief Act" includes a provision that would keep the Delta Cross Channel Gates open as long as possible to allow more water to be delivered to people and farms. The gates typically are closed at this time of year to protect fish from getting pulled into the central delta as they migrate up the Sacramento River.

Californians disagree about the causes contributing to the water shortage. Asked to assign blame, 37 percent said it stemmed from the state not using existing supplies efficiently, while 27 percent faulted a lack of enough water storage and supply facilities. Another 20 percent said both were reasons for the shortage, and 12 percent had no opinion.

"There are pronounced regional differences of opinion about this," the polling group said in a statement. "Voters in the Central Valley are more likely than voters elsewhere to blame a lack of adequate water storage and supply facilities in the state. In most other parts of the state, pluralities of voters think the inefficient use of water is more responsible for the current situation."

A large part of the state's farming happens in the Central Valley.

House Democrats last week introduced a bill to expand a reservoir in the San Francisco Bay Area to supply the region with water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. H.R. 4456 would more than double the capacity of Los Vaqueros Reservoir, a 160,000-acre-foot storage facility. Reps. John Garamendi (D-Calif.) and Doug LaMalfa (R-Calif.) last month offered a bill that would approve a 1.9-million-acre-foot reservoir in Northern California. Costa has proposed upgrades at three other storage sites.

In another question, 54 percent of those surveyed said that the state's agricultural operations could reduce their water use "without creating real hardships by changing crops and using water more efficiently," while 30 percent disagreed with that statement. Agriculture currently consumes about three-fourths of the state's freshwater supply, the poll said.

Again the answers depended on the region of the state. The view that agriculture could conserve more was held by 55 percent in the San Francisco Bay Area, 57 percent in Los Angeles County and 61 percent across other parts of Southern California. In the Central Valley, 45 percent agreed, and 43 percent in Northern California supported the statement.

The poll asked about voluntary versus mandatory cutbacks. Gov. Jerry Brown (D) has called for 20 percent voluntary conservation, though some cities have imposed mandatory restrictions.

In the survey results, 67 percent favored voluntary and 27 percent supported mandatory water rationing.