72 gallons a day?

David Bolling, Sonoma Index-Tribune, 1-18-14

In Israel, annual, per-capita water use is about 100 cubic meters, or about 26,000 gallons.

Translate that into a daily water ration, and you learn that the average Israeli uses about 72 gallons a day.

Historically, Sonoma has been blessed with a comparative abundance of water, allowing a per-capita daily water consumption that stood, in 2008, at 262 gallons, almost four times that in Israel.

Of course, some parts of Israel are so hot and arid they get less than 2 inches of water a year, while others get more than 30. But Israel has far less rain, in general, and no Sierra snow bank to draw on, which is why that country relies on five, large desalination plants to provide 75 percent of its household water.

Will Sonoma's waterscape some day resemble that of Israel? That's a question we need to start asking ourselves, because – unless 97 percent of the world's climate scientists are wrong – we're headed in that direction.

If you've been to Israel, especially in the summertime, you know it can get very, very hot. But you also know that there is not a sense that the spigots have been welded shut or that multitudes of olive trees are drying up.

Israelis have learned to do with what they've got.

So should we.

In this current drought – potentially the worst on record – we still have more water per capita in California than Israel could in its wildest dreams. But we don't use it nearly as well. And that suggests two things to us: First, there is an obvious and urgent need to double down on conservation, to whittle that 262-gallon-per-person-per-day consumption pattern down to something more sustainable.

For some mysterious reason, during the same 2008 water use survey, nearby Rohnert Park was getting by with a per-capita water consumption of 139 gallons a day.

The Sonoma County Water Agency wants us all to voluntarily reduce our consumption by a modest 20 gallons a day per-person. Shorter showers and turning off the faucet while brushing our teeth should just about do that.

But in the water future we may be entering, those steps barely scratch the surface.

Which brings us to the second suggestion: California water lines have been drawn for decades between opposing camps with contradictory solutions for our chronic water crises. One side believes in plumbing solutions, the other believes in policy. One side wants to build more dams, pipelines, storage facilities – more plumbing. The other side wants to improve regulation and management of existing water supplies before building more of anything.

We suspect the final solution will borrow from both camps, but we are convinced that it is a radical mistake to endorse plumbing solutions – like the multi-billion-dollar Delta tunnels to which Gov. Brown is now married – before we have reached science-driven consensus on the best policy practices.

California needs to explore and challenge every supply-and-demand assumption before making billion-dollar

decisions. We need to honestly address the issues of abandoning marginal farmland, exploring vastly expanded investments in agricultural infrastructure like sub-surface drip irrigation, and identifying the best and highest use for all our developed and undeveloped water before making massive new capital investments.

If the rest of this winter is as dry as last year's, we're in trouble.

And maybe, if we're smart, that will prove to be a good thing.