

Better solutions for managing California's water

Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, Sacramento Bee, 1-26-14

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During the current drought, the public will hear a lot about water management in California. Unfortunately, Californians are being presented with a false dichotomy – that California's water problems are about fish vs. people. It's what large corporate agribusinesses from the Westlands Water District and Kern County Water Agency have been pushing on the public since 2009. While we agree with these opposing groups that we have a water management problem that is harming everyday people, the facts show that the causes and solutions are different than what they claim.

Over the past 10 years, Westlands and Kern have taken more water from the Delta on an annual average basis than the Los Angeles Metropolitan Water District and the Santa Clara Valley Water District combined – even though tens of millions of people use water in these urban water districts. Yet Westlands and Kern County growers contribute less than 0.3 percent to the state's annual GDP, and the farmworker communities found within these water districts suffer from high unemployment even when there's plenty of water flowing through the system.

Reservoirs serving the Metropolitan Water District in Southern California are filled to 93 percent, 97 percent and 103 percent of capacity. Recently, Metropolitan Water District's Jeff Kightlinger said the district has enough water in storage to get through the next two to three years if this dry period should continue.

So why has Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought? And why are the groups who have been pushing for construction of twin tunnels, which will cost ratepayers and taxpayers more than \$60 billion with interest and operational costs, calling to take even more water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta?

The Brown administration most recently, and the Department of Water Resources historically, have failed to manage California's finite water supply during dry periods, even though California has historically experienced drought over a third of the time. As Bill Jennings with the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance explains, "We entered 2013 with Shasta, Oroville and Folsom reservoirs at 115 percent, 113 percent, and 121 percent of historical average storage. In April, they were still at 101 percent, 108 percent and 96 percent of average. With no rainfall and little snowpack, the Department of Water Resources and the Bureau (of Reclamation) notified their contractors that water deliveries would be reduced. But they didn't reduce deliveries. Instead, they actually exported 835,000 acre-feet more water than they said they would be able to deliver."

The Department of Water Resources and the Bureau of Reclamation's gamble to overpump the Delta not only has had devastating consequences on Bay-Delta fisheries, water quality for Delta family farms and the Sacramento River, it has left Northern California reservoirs without enough water to share in the present. Once again, state water officials capitulated to the demands of leaders from Westlands and Kern to support their unsustainable agricultural practices. The failure to carry over storage and to plan for dry conditions, which are a regular part of California's climate, can only be described as gross mismanagement by water officials.

Groups serving as the voice of Westlands and Kern are now poised to claim that their present drought problems are caused by fish needing water. These same groups will embark on a fear campaign that 23 million Californians will be denied drinking water, which we know from those Southern California reservoir capacity numbers is simply not true. These front groups will continue to deny that the boom and bust cycle of poor water

management decisions has happened at the urging of their big agribusiness funders, who are the last in line for surplus water in California.

Californians need to understand that there is a better way to manage our water. First, we need to export a safe yield of water from the Delta without repeatedly depleting the watershed. Second, we need to reinforce levees to ensure that the water that can be shared from the Delta is secure for all Californians. Third, we need to retire drainage-impaired agricultural lands on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. This will ultimately be cheaper than building the twin tunnels, and it will end the cycle of poor water management decisions made by state officials to enrich a few hundred corporate agribusinesses.

Most importantly, we need to put unemployed Californians back to work by investing in smaller local water projects throughout the state that will actually help create water. Independent reports on water conservation projects show that recycling, groundwater cleanup and conservation programs will put twice as many people to work for each \$1 million spent than a big project like the twin tunnels.

This is the better solution for managing California's water for all Californians. That is why we are calling on Gov. Brown to rethink his plan for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and to embark on creating a sustainable water plan for California.