

California governor declares drought emergency

Debra Kahn, Environment & Energy Publishing, 1-17-14

California Gov. Jerry Brown has declared an official drought emergency, opening the way for federal funding and giving the state more flexibility for moving water in an effort to meet demands in record-dry conditions.

Flanked by posters showing the Sierra Nevada range nearly bare compared with last year's snow-covered peaks, the Democrat called for everyone to voluntarily reduce their water use by 20 percent and warned that mandatory restrictions could follow.

"We're facing perhaps the worst drought that California has ever seen since records began being kept about 100 years ago," he said. "As the weeks go by, we'll recalibrate, and certainly we're holding out the possibility of mandatory conservation."

After 2013 became the driest year in recorded history for California, the first few weeks of 2014 have also seen record-low precipitation levels. The state's reservoirs are now at 62 percent of their average capacity, and water managers have begun to reduce flows from dams in order to save threatened fish.

Snowpack levels have fallen from 20 percent of average at the beginning of this month to 17 percent as of yesterday, the lowest on record.

Brown said he expects the emergency declaration to result in some funding for parched communities. The declaration will also speed water transfers within the state, which are hampered by historical water allocation systems that slow down approvals. It also authorizes the state to hire additional firefighters to suppress wildfires.

"There's not a government program that in and of itself can totally compensate for the lack of rain," Brown said.

Lawmakers on the state and federal levels praised the move. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) called on President Obama to quickly approve a disaster declaration on the federal level and appoint a drought task force, as she, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Rep. Jim Costa (D-Calif.) requested in a [letter](#) yesterday.

"The declaration provides the state with greater flexibility to address drought conditions and lays the foundation for federal disaster assistance through a presidential declaration," Feinstein said. "Now that the governor has issued the state declaration, I hope the president will act quickly to approve the federal declaration."

Brown said the drought underscored the need for more sophisticated strategies to conserve water, including recycling and groundwater management. "The drought emphasizes that we do live in an era of limits: that nature has its boundaries and we have to be as efficient and elegant in the way we live and the way we conduct ourselves," he said. "Between what is technically feasible and what we're doing is a huge gap."

Water agencies agreed, singling out Brown's plan to build tunnels underneath the state's main water hub, the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, to bring water from the north to the south without routing it through the fragile delta ecosystem itself.

"The drought is official now, but we've been struggling with dry conditions for the past two years," said Terry Erlewine, general manager of the State Water Contractors. "Public water agencies throughout the state are taking actions locally to conserve and manage limited supplies, but it's imperative that we also modernize our statewide water delivery system so we can be better prepared for droughts."

Other groups that oppose the export of millions of acre-feet of water from the delta to supply 25 million Californians chimed in against the tunnels. "California needs to invest in local alternatives to the tunnels that improve water supplies in dry years," said Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, executive director of Restore the Delta, which includes environmental and fishing groups. "Groundwater cleanup, recycling, storage and other projects are far superior to the tunnels."

Protesters outside Brown's offices in San Francisco called for a ban on hydraulic fracturing, which uses large volumes of water to blast apart rock formations that contain oil and natural gas.

"Fracking is the elephant in the room," said Zack Malitz, a fracking campaigner with the environmental group Credo Mobile. "It consumes huge quantities of precious water and loads the dice for more extreme droughts like this one by accelerating climate change."