

# SoCal resists water rationing

Michael Gardner, San Diego Union-Tribune, 1-30-14

SACRAMENTO — Under intensifying pressure, leading Southern California water managers promised Gov. Jerry Brown on Thursday that they will take aggressive steps to encourage conservation after weeks of following a more cautious approach.

With the Sierra snowpack at only 10 percent of normal and reservoir levels rapidly shrinking, Brown has implored Californians to save water. The current storm in Northern California is welcome, but not a drought-buster by any means.

At the San Diego County Water Authority, officials have been mapping out proposals to bring to the board of directors Feb. 27. No mandatory rationing is on the immediate horizon.

Southern California water officials have come under fire, albeit privately, for their resistance to pushing more conservation than what's already ingrained standard practice in the region. Southern California, including San Diego, is practically using the same amount of water that it was taking more than a decade ago despite its growing population.

But in the north state and Central Valley, this third year of punishing shortages is exacting a heavy toll.

In Sacramento, where two mighty rivers merge before massive pumps push flows south to Los Angeles, residents have been ordered to cut use by 20 percent. The tiny Redwood country town of Willits has imposed a 150-gallon per day limit on household uses and a 35 percent reduction on businesses. Elsewhere, cattle ranchers plan to thin their herds because there is sparse pasture and farmers in the San Joaquin Valley may be forced to idle thousands of acres — potentially tossing field hands out of work and leading to higher prices at the grocery store.

But in most of Southern California there are few mandatory restrictions despite the drought gripping the rest of the state.

Why?

Most significantly, Southern California has vast reserves thanks to the adoption of a determined — and costly — “never again” philosophy after the region was decimated by the harshest of dry spells in 1976-1977. The 1987-1992 drought only reinforced the aggressive spending, which produced the Diamond Valley reservoir, a new aqueduct and deals to pay farmers to conserve in exchange for a share of the saved supplies. Moreover, Metropolitan used its political capital to negotiate more favorable access to unused water at Lake Mead in Nevada. Moreover, the Colorado River system is showing improvements after paltry runoff much of the past decade,

The San Diego County Water Authority has been equally persistent, driven by memories of deep cuts in past droughts and a thirst for independent supplies. The authority secured a hard-fought agreement to buy water from Imperial County, is expanding San Vicente dam and has embarked in an expensive ocean desalination project in Carlsbad. All bring higher rates, but a more reliable supply.

Both agencies also have pushed conservation, even during times of plenty. Rebate programs and other carrots to entice residents and businesses to use less are being offered. Metropolitan, for example, has set aside \$20 million to help install everything from low-flush toilets to rain barrels this fiscal year alone.

On Thursday morning, Brown and Southern California water officials met privately to debate how far the region should go.

Metropolitan General Manager Jeff Kightlinger subsequently issued a statement pledging to double the agency's commitment to conservation incentives — to \$40 million from the current \$20 million. The district also plans to issue a more formal, but still voluntary, conservation directive.

“The dry conditions are unprecedented and this region stands united with the governor in supporting his call for a statewide approach to a statewide problem,” Kightlinger said in his statement.

In an earlier interview, San Diego County Water Authority Director Elsa Saxod wondered whether the board should issue a stepped up call for voluntary compliance given the pain roiling across the state.

“I am not truly convinced whether we should or should not. I am still trying to find out for myself,” said Saxod.

Saxod said a final decision would be better made after the final snowfall tallies. After all, February, and sometimes March, can deliver storms with punch. Authority officials also said they want to follow Metropolitan's lead.

There also may be political repercussions from the drought. Republicans have already tried — and failed — in Congress to weaken environmental policies that they say are not farmer-friendly. State and federal GOP candidates also are planning to blame vulnerable Democrats in this election year for the water woes.

Coincidentally, the state's second snow pack measurement of the season is set for later Thursday. Given the parched January, the crew is unlikely to find more than a few inches, even at the highest of elevations. On Wednesday, the electronic readings reported a paltry 10 percent.

Snow pack measurements, along with reservoir levels, help determine how much water the state delivers to farms and cities. The current figure is just 5 percent of usual amounts with little hope of it increasing soon.

Up until Thursday, the giant Metropolitan Water District and some of its member agencies have privately come under fire for boasting about having plenty of water — a perceived slap at Northern California, which, after all, is where about two-thirds of the state's drinking water originates.

“We are going to be talking to our board about how to best up our conservation message,” said Kightlinger said in an interview earlier this week.

Kightlinger said Metropolitan has to be vigilant even though officially it has sufficient supplies to carry it through nearly two more years without rationing.

“We don't know how long it will last,” he said. The state's 5 percent allotment to Metropolitan and other buyers “is the lowest ever. We've never been this low, this late,” he said.

So why not lay down stricter conservation orders now?

“People don’t like it when you cry wolf,” Kightlinger said, explaining that a rush to rationing would come with weeks of winter still in the wings, Kightlinger said the public generally responds to persuasive urging, rather than direct orders.

During past droughts, Metropolitan has been one of those in line wanting to buy water from those who have excess supplies, particularly; in Northern California. But don’t expect a role reversal. Kightlinger is noncommittal.

“Our board has never done that outside our service area,” he said. “We are just going to have to be nimble. We want to work with the state so that dislocation is kept at a minimum.”

Both Metropolitan and San Diego credit ongoing conservation — drought or no drought — for them being in a good position despite three straight dry years.

According to water authority figures, the San Diego region has reduced use to 546,500 acre feet in 2013 from 721,000 in 2007, despite population increases. That’s a 174,500 acre-foot savings, or nearly 29,000 acre-feet a year — enough for 58,000 average households annually.

“We realize we are at the end of the pipeline and have to be cautious how we use water,” said Saxod, citing the already strong conservation ethic in the region.