

Critics say California drought caused by misguided environment policies

Malia Zimmerman, Fox News, 4-16-15

The blistering drought that has Californians timing their showers, driving dirty cars and staring at brown lawns and empty swimming pools is a “man-made disaster,” according to critics, who say the Golden State’s misguided environmental policies allow much-needed freshwater to flow straight into the Pacific.

In an average year, California gets enough snow and rain to put 200 million acres under a foot of water, but environmental opposition to dams over the last several decades has allowed the majority of the freshwater to flow into the ocean, even as the state’s population exploded to nearly 40 million people. The current drought has left farms parched and residents under strict water consumption orders, but some say it didn't have to be that way.

“This is a man-made disaster,” said Bonner Cohen, senior fellow with the National Center for Public Policy Research. “Southern California is an arid part of the world where droughts -- even severe droughts -- are commonplace, and knowing this, you’d think the government of California would have included this mathematical certainty in its disaster preparedness planning, but the government has done nothing, not even store rain, as the population has continued to grow.”

Gov. Jerry Brown last week mandated the state’s residents cut water usage by as much as 35 percent, saying, "As Californians, we have to pull together and save water in every way we can." Consumers face stiff penalties, forced installation of water restriction devices and even water service suspension if they don’t comply with county mandates. Commercial users face even tougher sanctions, with one county requiring them to cut usage by 80 percent.

The critics say California gets plenty of water to meet its needs, if it were only managed properly. More than half of California’s surface water flows from the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the east down to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in Northern California. Much of the mountain runoff is managed by two of the world’s largest water storage and transport systems – the federal Central Valley Project and California's State Water Project. Each is a system of dams, reservoirs and distribution systems designed to send water to cities, towns and farms throughout the state.

But the vast majority of the state’s 1,400 dams and reservoirs, in the two massive systems and smaller ones that supply southern California, were built well before the 1980s. Environmentalists have since stopped the construction of water storage and delivery systems through legal and political actions. They have also fought to ensure that captured water is released into streams and the ocean -- rather than the water delivery system -- in order to boost fish populations and dilute the salinity of the delta.

“Droughts are nothing new in California, but right now, 70 percent of California's rainfall washes out to sea because liberals have prevented the construction of a single new reservoir or a single new water conveyance system over decades, during a period in which California’s population has doubled,” said Carly Fiorina, former CEO of Hewlett Packard and likely GOP presidential candidate. “This is the classic case of liberals being willing to sacrifice other people's lives and livelihoods at the altar of their ideology.”

Releasing the water is supposed to save the endangered fish population, including the Delta Smelt, Longfin Smelt, four runs of Chinook Salmon, the Steelhead, Green and White Sturgeon, Splittail and the

Sacramento hitch, but so far the fish population has decreased, according to experts. A state survey in March found just 6 Delta Smelt – four females and two males – prompting wildlife experts to estimate the species' population has dropped to 5,000 or fewer from the millions in the last 40 years

"Prepare for the extinction of the Delta Smelt in the wild," UC Davis fish biologist Peter Moyle said. "The population today may be too low to sustain itself," Moyle said. "Fish ready to spawn have to find one another in a big area. If spawning is successful, there have to be enough eggs and larvae that some individuals survive to become the next generation of spawners."

Jim Burling of the Pacific Legal Foundation said while water diversions have not helped endangered fish populations, the policies are devastating to people, produce and the economy.

"The plan is not doing anything for the fish and causing a lot of pain for farmers and farm workers," Burling said. "The impact of these policies on people should be considered."

The state has more than 80,000 farms and ranches, which generate more than \$44 billion in annual sales. California produces more than 250 different crops, leads the U.S. in production of 75 commodities, and, according to the Water Education Foundation, is the only state to produce 12 key crops such as almonds, artichokes, dates, figs, raisins, kiwi, olives, persimmons, pistachios, prunes and walnuts.

During the current drought, which began in 2012, and by some estimates could be the most severe in recorded history, billions of gallons of water have been diverted from farmlands, according to a report by the Washington D.C.-based Heritage Foundation, with the American Farm Bureau estimating that between 400,000 acres and 500,000 acres of crops will be lost.

Fiorina said it's a "tragedy" that the agricultural land in California, the most productive in the world, has been destroyed, along with farming jobs because of politics, policy, and liberal environmentalists.

Rep. Devin Nunes, a Republican who represents a Central Valley district in Congress, said roughly 21 million-acre feet of water is flushed into the ocean annually. One acre-foot equals 325,851 gallons, the average annual water usage for a suburban family household. He also blames environmental groups for the fact that the state is dry.

"The environmental groups did not expect to run everyone out of water, but they got greedy, shut down the whole system, and ran the whole damned state dry," Nunes said.

The environmental movement went to court to stop most new dam construction, according to Victor Davis Hanson, a Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow in Classics and Military History at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, including the Sites Reservoir; the Los Banos Grandes facility; and the Temperance Flat Reservoir.

The Klamath River diversion project also was canceled in the 1970s, putting an end to the Aw Paw reservoir, potentially the state's largest man-made reservoir with 15 million acre-feet of water, or enough to supply San Francisco for 30 years, Davis said.

"California's water-storage capacity would be nearly double what it is today had these plans come to fruition," Davis said in a report.

Environmentalists also diverted irrigation and municipal water from reservoirs and moved to freeze California's water-storage resources at 1970s capacities, Davis said

Nunes introduced the Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley Water Reliability Act of 2012 and co-sponsored the Sacramento-San Joaquin Emergency Water Delivery Act of 2014 to “restore water deliveries cut off by environmental lawsuits and federal regulation; streamline environmental regulatory processes to speed up 5,000,000 water reliability projects and transfers; expand the use of the Central Valley Project to allow water deliveries by non-federal sources; and end the effort to protect non-native species and instead focus on native species.”

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the legislation in 2013 and 2014, but U.S. Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein, both Democrats from California, refused to sign on to the GOP plan, and Brown, in charge of California from 1975 to 1983 and then again since 2011, also expressed opposition, Nunes said. As the crisis in California grows, Nunes hopes to get the legislation through the Senate and to President Obama for his signature.

“If we had stored water and built three new dams, the state would be flush with water,” Nunes said.

As millions of gallons of freshwater rush out to sea, some counties are looking for ways to bring desalinization plants online, and are spending millions of dollars to do so, but environmentalists are already speaking out against the plan, saying desalinization is energy-intensive and can negatively impact sea life.

Preparing for future droughts and making it through this one all comes down to math and engineering, Cohen said. “We know the systems we have to build to make sure the state has plenty of water, but instead we have wasted millions of acre feet of water in the last 10 years,” Cohen said. “The thought that you can conserve your way out of this is not going to lead to any success.”