

Californians need a new mindset about water

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One of the worst droughts on record forced California lawmakers and voters to implement far-reaching initiatives intended to change how the state manages water. And while the policy shifts last year were remarkable, Californians did not achieve the goal of conservation set by the governor.

The disconnect is baffling, considering how much California accomplished in water policy last year. Voters approved a \$7.5 billion water bond in a landslide, and legislators passed historic legislation that finally will lead to groundwater regulation.

Lawmakers also approved a \$687 million drought-relief package to assist farmworkers impacted by the drought, provide water for communities facing shortages and fund storm water capture and recycling.

Progress was extraordinary, given that water has been a source of perennial conflict in the Golden State.

Consensus doesn't come easily in the Capitol, but the Legislature placed the water bond on the November ballot by a near-unanimous vote. Legislation to manage groundwater proved more contentious, but the majority of lawmakers in the Senate and Assembly recognized the need for monitoring aquifers as reports grew about problems created from over pumped wells.

Next, the Legislature and the California Water Commission must determine how to invest billions of dollars to improve the health of rivers and aquifers, expand storage, and conserve and recycle water. Taxpayers will want to see smart planning and efficient use of their \$7.5 billion.

"The key is implementation, ensuring the money is spent well," said former Sen. Darrell Steinberg, who along with Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, helped shepherd the water bond from an \$11 billion iteration in 2009 to the pared-back version approved by voters.

As significant as the bond is, the passage of groundwater-reform legislation will have greater impact on the water supply. Normally, groundwater use accounts for one-third of the water used statewide. Last summer, in the third year of drought, groundwater use increased to more than 60%. As water deliveries were cut due to the drought, Central Valley farmers relied more on groundwater. As more wells were dug, others went dry.

"Groundwater reform will trigger a lot more focus on efficient water management in agriculture," predicted Lester Snow, executive director of the California Water Foundation.

The legislation will force water agencies to adopt sustainable groundwater management plans. That is a real milestone, given that California is not only home to a multibillion-dollar agriculture industry dependent on groundwater, but also that California was the last state in the West to regulate groundwater.

Voters can't criticize lawmakers for shirking responsibility for dealing with major issues. California's elected officials did their part in 2014.

Now the rest of us need to step up. Despite a severe water shortage that left reservoirs at all-time lows, and repeated entreaties from state officials, we haven't come close to the 20% reduction in water use that Brown requested last January. Compared to 2013, the state reached about a 12% reduction and that peaked in August.

Tellingly, a poll at the beginning of summer showed that there was a high awareness of the drought, but only 15% said that the drought affected them, Snow said. In other words, 85% of Californians don't think the drought affects them. This attitude needs to change.

“Water agencies and local governments need to push the value of water and the ease of conservation,” Snow said.

Part of that equation was set in motion in July when the State Water Resources Control Board made it a crime to waste water. Fines are one tool to force wise water use. But we like ideas advanced by Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Resources Control Board. She proposes using information, such as real-time data on water use, to goad consumers to use less.

In the decade ahead, she adds, the state needs to look at using recycled water and put more focus on using water barrels or cisterns to capture rain water, and recycled water for watering lawns and flushing toilets.

“The Australians have a saying: ‘right water for the right job,’” Marcus said, in explaining the use of various levels of water quality for different uses. “We use potable water for everything; we need to get away from that.”

Measures that once seemed extraordinary will have to become a new mindset for Californians. Even though winter storms have brought rain and snow, the drought is far from over. We should not ease up on efforts to conserve.