

Sacramento region to California: We've got plenty of water

Phillip Reese and Ryan Sabalow, The Sacramento Bee, 6-27-16

The Sacramento region's largest water districts have given a resounding answer to the question of whether they could handle three more years of drought: We have plenty of water.

The State Water Resources Control Board last month asked California's urban water districts to evaluate how much water they would need in the next three years if drought persisted – and whether their supplies would meet that demand. Districts that certify their supplies are adequate will not face mandatory water-use cuts. Those with inadequate supplies must set conservation goals proportional to their anticipated shortfall.

The new localized approach to water conservation in California is a sharp reversal from last year, when a “we're all in this together” ethos led the state to demand mandatory water-use cuts of more than 28 percent throughout most of the Sacramento region compared with 2013.

Each of the 10 largest districts in the Sacramento region told the state last week that their water supplies are healthy and there is no need to impose mandatory percentage-based cuts again this year. Some districts reported large surpluses, contending they could withstand multiple years of drought without running out of water. Others reported a surplus but said that they would ask for voluntary conservation from customers. The city of Sacramento reported adequate supplies but nonetheless will maintain a two-day-a-week outdoor watering schedule and has set a water-use reduction target of 20 percent compared with 2013.

Several large districts in Southern California, which received far less precipitation this winter and remain dependent on imported water, also reported having ample supplies to withstand three more years of drought. Earlier this month, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, a mammoth wholesaler serving 19 million people, told its contractors that it had adequate supplies for the next three years. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and the San Diego County Water Authority also reported they had passed the state's so-called drought stress test.

Under the state's newly relaxed conservation rules, California's 400 urban water districts were to submit an analysis of their supply conditions and conservation outlook by last Wednesday. The water board won't publish the responses until next month. The Sacramento Bee asked a number of individual districts across the region and California for copies of their submissions.

Water board chairwoman Felicia Marcus said Friday that, without analyzing the submissions, it's too early to say whether California is looking at a widespread retreat from last year's conservation efforts. Under the state's 2015 mandates, cities and suburbs cut usage nearly 25 percent statewide compared with 2013.

“We'll have a problem if people step back and say, ‘Water your lawn with wild abandon,’ ” she said. “But I suspect it's going to be a more complex story. I think we're going to take a little while to see what this means.”

Environmentalists interviewed said they saw troubling contradictions between the optimistic supply outlooks so many districts are reporting and the realities of the state's water situation. Forty percent of the state is in extreme or exceptional drought and the entire state is abnormally dry, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center.

Federal officials are struggling to come up with a plan for managing north-state reservoirs in a manner that ensures irrigation water for farms this summer, as well as cold, healthy flows for endangered fish species brought to the brink of extinction by the long drought. One of the plans under consideration could significantly deplete reservoirs, including Folsom Lake, a primary source of drinking water for the Sacramento region.

Noah Garrison, a water law expert and environmental scientist at the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, said amid that uncertainty, as well as forecasts of a dry La Niña winter, it's unthinkable that districts would say they're in good shape.

"It's incredibly short-sighted," he said. "And it's emblematic of the way California has treated its problem over the past four or five years."

Water officials in the Sacramento region counter that they've asked ratepayers to spend millions in recent years on drought resiliency programs and that supplies were boosted by near-normal precipitation in Northern California. The state's two largest reservoirs have more water than average for this time of year. Eight of California's 12 major reservoirs are at depths that are at least 75 percent of normal. The region has ample groundwater.

Still, agency officials acknowledged that much of the state remains in drought, which means they're facing seemingly contradictory narratives: Tell their customers to keep conserving – while at the same time announcing that their water supplies are adequate to handle years of continued dry weather.

The Placer County Water Agency offers an example of how that messaging challenge is playing out. It has spent years investing in reservoirs and pumping facilities. It has solid water contracts in the high Sierra that have come through even in the worst of the drought. Its reservoirs stand above normal levels.

So the agency reported a huge surplus to the state and recently lifted restrictions on outdoor watering.

"We certainly have full supply," said agency spokesman Ross Branch. "We have more than enough supply to meet our customer demands."

But the agency will continue to offer rebates to customers pursuing conservation. It also will remind them that the drought is not over. "We certainly believe that using water efficiently is a good stewardship of the resource," Branch said.

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Felicia Marcus, chairwoman, State Water Resources Control Board

At the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, a similar story is unfolding. Officials said they have enough water to withstand three more dry years, thanks to investments in supply capacity and extensive turf replacement rebates offered to customers. But they also want residents to continue to conserve.

"Staying on the path we are on will allow us to weather the next few years as we bring on more local water supplies and drive down our reliance on imported water," senior assistant general manager Marty Adams said in a written statement. "In short, the zero percent requirement by the state goes hand-in-hand with the city's reduced water demands and future water supply plans."

Tim Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, said telling customers to conserve while acknowledging healthy water supplies is not a contradiction. The focus now, he said, should be on long-term savings.

“We’ve got the resources in place so that we are drought-prepared in no small part because of the sacrifices and the conservation and the local resource investments that we have been making in the past,” he said. “But this is not the time to let up on those things. This is the time to raise the bar. ... Climate change and other things are just going to make the challenge greater.”

Water board staff will spend the next two weeks reviewing the supply evaluations. Max Gomberg, the board’s climate and conservation manager, said staff likely would present their findings to the water board in early July.

Marcus, the water board chair, said several districts that have reported adequate water supplies have assured the board their customers would continue to conserve, even in the absence of mandatory cuts. Districts will be required to report monthly how much water customers use. The board could choose to be more aggressive if conservation stops.

“My hope is folks will keep conserving,” she said. “You don’t have to regulate everything.”