

California must act on water security now

U.S. Representative Loretta Sanchez, Bakersfield Californian, 10-6-16

Water security is an urgent issue for California that requires immediate and effective action.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, in 2014-15 more than 95 percent of our \$43 billion agricultural sector experienced severe, extreme, or exceptional drought. Devastating wildfires have spiked across the state, displacing hundreds of families and draining our emergency reserve funds. The prolonged drought has been a wakeup call for California and the rest of America that we need both immediate action and a long-term water supply policy.

Sustained relief from California's drought crisis won't be an easy fix, but I believe we will overcome this challenge by harnessing the strength, innovation and sense of community that have always made California great. Investing now in common-sense water infrastructure projects for each geographic region of California will benefit our environment and provide long-term savings to taxpayers.

Fair and responsible distribution of our limited water resources among California's regions is fundamental to success. "Us versus them" thinking will frustrate action and produce self-defeating behavior. Water is essential to life, economic growth and a healthy environment for all regions and industries. California agriculture is a national treasure, producing more than half of America's agricultural production. It also provides fresh, affordable and high-quality food to California homes.

Similarly, our cities are centers of innovation, culture and industry that provide markets, goods and services that make our way of life possible. Our diverse regions are inextricably linked: when any region of our state is out of balance, we feel the ramifications throughout the rest of the state and country. Californians are all in this together.

We must go to work immediately on three priorities.

First, regions of California which have been blessed with abundant natural water resources must step up to the plate and contribute more to other regions by shifting a portion of their water supply to recycled water.

Second, we must invest in more statewide water storage and transfer infrastructure, so that we can capture water in wetter years and use it in the dry ones that are certain to come.

Finally, we must explore new desalinization technologies and approaches that will produce new water resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner. Securing our water resources requires investing in projects that will promote long-term sustainability and create thousands of new jobs.

Southern California has taken the lead in developing and investing in water conservation and recycling infrastructure for the past 20 years. My home district of Orange County has been able to increase its water independence even during this historic drought, because we planned responsibly for future droughts by investing in clean, efficient water recycling and conservation projects. I've secured federal funding for projects like Orange County's Ground Water Replenishment System, which recycles treated wastewater into clean drinking water that exceeds federal and state standards, and has produced more than 197 billion gallons of new water since 2008. That's more than 24 billion gallons per year, and almost 29,000 gallons per year for the residents of north and central Orange County — enough to meet the needs of more than 283,000 households.

If we are going to solve the water challenge together, then everyone needs a seat at the table. We must build a strong coalition capable of moving California to real solutions. For example, Sen. Dianne Feinstein has been working on a drought relief bill for two years where all stakeholders have a seat at the table. Sen. Feinstein's bill would provide short-term drought relief and increase long-term regional water sustainability. Building on her bill, I believe Congress can come together to pass comprehensive drought legislation that addresses the concerns and is responsive to the differing needs of Northern, Central and Southern California, and other western states that are also at risk of future droughts.

Increasing California's water supply and protecting endangered species like the Delta Smelt are not mutually exclusive. I support increased pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to alleviate the burden on our drought stricken communities when scientifically justified. Simply maintaining the status quo means continuing the degradation of both the nation's largest agricultural economy and our state's wildlife and ecosystem diversity. The Delta is a special place, and so is the San Joaquin Valley, and the benefit of one cannot come at the cost of the other. There is a better path forward and we must work together to achieve it.

We are at a time of reckoning, and California must make bold yet calculated steps forward. California's economy will be stronger in the long term by fundamentally adapting to the reality of the drought. California has the tools and resources at our disposal to solve the drought crisis and increase security and prosperity for all of our regions. We need to invest in meaningful and innovative water infrastructure to secure the water independence of our future generations. I am confident that, together, Californians will overcome this crisis, and lead the rest of the nation and the world by example.