Another view on water woes

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We've been writing for several years about the need for local policy makers to get their heads together to devise a plan to facilitate desalination. It's something we think about as each drought drags on another year.

It's pretty much a no-brainer. Nearly five years of drought — a recurring theme in California climate history — dwindling water supplies, hit-or-miss local conservation efforts and general panic about what to do if the winter rains don't come through.

It is California's version of a revolving door when it comes to climate.

We've touted desalination because we have one of the world's largest bodies of water literally at our doorstep. Removing salt from ocean water gives us all of that precious resource we could ever need.

But not everyone agrees that desal is the wisest option. One contrarian is Justin Fox, a columnist for Bloomberg View who has written for Time, Fortune and other national publications. Fox writes often about California and its wonderland of diverse situations, and he tends to make very compelling arguments.

In his recent opus, Fox questions the real value of desalination, making it clear he doesn't consider the Pacific Ocean the most viable option for California's present and future water shortages.

Earlier this year, he wrote a piece for Bloomberg, the point of which was to explain why, when it comes to water supply, there is no such thing as normal in California. We repeat, he makes some extremely valid points.

In Fox's most recent column, he explains how desal water is, by far, the most expensive option for bolstering California's water supply. The math is pretty straight-forward — whereas reservoir-stored surface water costs consumers $200-$300 and acre-foot, which is approximately enough for a family of four for a year, a typical acre-foot of desalinated ocean water's cost is $2,100-$2,300, and maybe more, depending on which process is used.

Fox points out other issues with desal. For example, nations along the Persian Gulf have been using desalination since the 1980s, and are now encountering a problem. When sea water is desalted, the brine is dumped back into the body from which the original water was taken. In the Persian Gulf, narrow and relatively shallow, the salt content is increasing to levels that adversely affect marine life.

That would not be an issue off the coast of California, because the Pacific Ocean is neither narrow nor shallow, but if you think long-term, who knows?

In Fox's analysis, he points out that conserving and converting are the cost-efficient ways to go, and he's likely correct about that, in part because despite this current drought, California tends to get enough rain and snow to sustain this state's population growth. That is, if policy makers in places where those Californians live invoke permanent water-conservation measures and create policy that encourages the conversion of lush greenery to something more appropriate to California's semi-arid to arid climate conditions.

We also could do a better job of creating the type of infrastructure that takes advantage of what rainfall and snowpack we do manage to get. California gets 90 percent of its rain and snow between October and early

spring, and we watch, helplessly, as far too much of that water races downhill to the ocean, which really doesn’t need more water.

We are grateful to Justin Fox for penning his insightful column on desal’s exorbitant costs. From a strictly cost-analysis basis, his conclusion is spot-on.

The question then becomes, what will policy makers and Californians do with the information?