

# Facing the realities of limited water supplies

**Dan Morain, The Sacramento Bee, 9-10-16**

In the coming days and weeks, some of the implications of climate change and the need to improve California's aging water delivery system will become more evident to all parts of the state, none too soon.

Old lines in California's unending water wars could start to shift, as Gov. Jerry Brown's administration makes clear that the holders of senior water rights, which date to the turn of the last century and before, are not immune to the demands of the environment and the realities of diminishing supplies of what they claim as their water.

The State Water Resources Control Board is preparing to release reports – they go by the supremely bureaucratic name, Substitute Environmental Documents – next week and later this month that will make clear to all parts of the state that they face an era of limits, not unlike San Joaquin Valley farmers and Southern Californians.

“Sure, it includes everybody,” said Mark W. Cowin, director of the California Department of Water Resources, which is responsible for operating the State Water Project.

In its reports, the Water Board, which is responsible for ensuring that fish can survive despite our massive pumping system, is expected to spell out the amount of water that must flow down the once mighty San Joaquin River and its tributaries into the Delta out to the Golden Gate.

That means San Francisco, along with Modesto, Merced, Turlock and other holders of senior water rights, will be forced more directly into the discussion about how best to restore fisheries and ultimately the Delta.

“All of the water rights holders throughout the Central Valley have a responsibility to provide their fair share,” Cowin told me.

The reports are part of efforts by Brown and his administration to stabilize the water delivery system that serves almost 40 million people, but was constructed when there were fewer than 20 million residents, before the Legislature and Congress passed laws to protect endangered species.

The already fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta faces the ever-present risk of an earthquake that would destroy levees suddenly, and, as we've come to learn, the slow-motion catastrophe of rising oceans brought about by warming temperatures and melting glaciers. Fast or slow, salt-water intrusion threatens the Delta as we've known it, and Californians' water supply.

For years, the Southern California Metropolitan Water District, responsible for supplying water to millions of Californians from Los Angeles to San Diego, has contended that we Californians are all in this together. It's an aspirational notion, at best.

Sure, we benefit from Southern California's economic and cultural riches, and Southern California depends on Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water, as do the Silicon Valley and many Central Valley farmers. But the symbiotic relationship goes only so far.

Environmentally sensitive residents of San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties have had the luxury of standing off to the side. A century ago, San Francisco's representatives pushed the Raker Act through Congress, allowing them to dam the Tuolumne River and inundate Hetch Hetchy Valley. Ever since, they have benefited from a steady supply of sparkling Sierra water.

The Water Board will issue subsequent reports making clear that senior water rights holders in the Sacramento River Valley must give up some what they have seen as their water for the benefit of the environment.

Then there is groundwater, the bank that farmers rely upon to irrigate their crops during drought. By Dec. 31, the state must publish a report that will detail the degree of overdrafting and what users must do to replenish the aquifer. Water to recharge groundwater must come from somewhere.

It all will lead to hard choices, less farming, higher costs and pressure to cut water consumption.

Some Sacramento Valley farmers are pushing for a Sites Reservoir west of the Sacramento River in Colusa and Glenn counties, to be funded in part with the \$7.5 billion water bond approved by voters in 2014. That's part of the solution.

Gov. Jerry Brown and his aides are advocating the California WaterFix, which includes environmental restoration, and the \$15.5 billion twin tunnels, 40 feet in diameter and 35 miles long, to divert Sacramento River water past the Delta to farms and cities to the south and west. Some Delta interests, farmers and environmentalists oppose the tunnels, including many of the ones who drink from Hetch Hetchy.

The Water Board reports are not directly tied to big water projects. But there is a connection. The reports will make clear that every part of California must give up some water to help the fish, not just the farmers and residents who rely on the federal Central Valley Project and the California aqueduct named for Jerry Brown's father.

There's not much immediate political upside to any of this. It costs billions and it's unpopular. That's clear from the vast majority of political leaders who are silent, even those whose constituents would most directly benefit from a rebuilt water system. But perhaps there are the makings of a grand solution, once all parts of the state understand they face the hard realities of diminishing supplies.