

# State's water planning should begin at the source – the Sierra

**Joseph Day and Richard McIntyre, Sacramento Bee, 4-13-10**

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The Sierra Nevada is the foundation of California's water system and needs attention. The Sierra supplies 65 percent of all water used by the people of the state, from the clean, safe water that comes from your faucets to the water used to grow crops.

Without its broad granite presence looming over the Central Valley, what most of us take for granted as "the way things are" would not be.

Without the Sierra, irrespective of what laws were passed, the state, federal and regional water projects that supply San Francisco, the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California simply would not exist – and neither would the San Francisco Bay Delta.

For millennia, the Sierra has served as a barrier to storms rolling east from the Pacific. The high peaks "stack up" winter storms, causing rain and snowfall to drop here in California, making the Sierra the largest water storage facility in the State.

The average Sierra snowpack dwarfs the capacity of all of the dams and reservoirs we now have or anticipate building. Nature knew what it was doing; the meadows and forests of the Sierra provide natural storage for our water, releasing it slowly over time and providing us with clean water. Without the Sierra, there is no Bay Delta, there is no great valley agriculture, and California would be limited in its water supply – for any purpose.

The Sierra snowpack is a natural reservoir; its deeply incised watersheds act as nature's arteries, carrying rainfall and melted snow to the Bay Delta and other regions of the state. Those watersheds carry the names of California's most famous rivers: the Sacramento, Feather, American, Yuba, Stanislaus, Mokelumne, Owens, Tuolumne, Kings and San Joaquin, among others.

Often ignored in the political wrangling over water is the importance of this "natural infrastructure" in our statewide water system. The system of water storage and transport we describe was not made by man, but by nature. Dams, pipes and tunnels can only do what nature allows them to do. Without the Sierra to quench California's thirst, we would have much less clean water to lay claim to for any purpose. Much attention and legislation has recently focused on the Bay Delta and the need for cities, farms and fish to have "co-equal" protection and priorities for investment. Lost in that statement is the need to protect the very source of our clean water, the Sierra.

It is all too easy for downstream urban residents and farmers to take the Sierra and its key role in California water for granted. Completely overlooked by those water consumers is the fact that a tiny portion of the state's population is charged with stewarding and protecting water supply and quality for tens of millions of residents and the nation's largest agricultural economy. The focus on the Delta and the water bond in the press ignores an irrefutable fact: that funding for critical Sierra headwaters restoration projects is being pushed to ever-lower priority levels, leaving the meadows, forests and communities of the Sierra high and dry. It is said that "water flows uphill to money." It is time for the opposite to be true. It is time for investment in our natural

infrastructure in the Sierra to be made a priority by using funds from previously voter-approved Propositions 50 and 84.

Others have said much about the problems in California's water system and it need not be repeated here. What does need to be said is that we must manage our entire water system and not just one piece of it. That begins where the water originates.

Professionals planning for California's water future in the Department of Water Resources have recognized this connection between upstream and downstream, between the Sierra and San Diego, Yosemite and San Francisco. The latest version of the State Water Plan Update calls for a watershed management strategy and includes a forest management strategy developed with the active involvement of the U.S. Forest Service. This systemwide thinking is a positive element and one we hope the Department of Water Resources will continue to develop.

Much of the recent talk has been about the Delta crisis and what to do or not do about it. For those on the periphery of those discussions, as well as those in the center where the pressure is greatest, we urge you to pause now and then, and look to the Sierra. There is a quiet message in those snowcapped peaks. The sound of cool, clean, running water should not be taken for granted.