Drought is a common occurrence in California. Over the last 100 years in the Sacramento Valley, critically dry, dry and below normal water years have occurred 14%, 22% and 18% of the time, respectively. Consecutive dry years occur frequently. The six years between 1987 and 92 were: dry, critical, dry, critical, critical and critical water years. We’ve had two droughts in the last seven years.

Unfortunately, the state and federal water projects operate on a year-to-year basis, with little thought of tomorrow – of the likelihood of consecutive dry years.

For example: we entered 2013 with Shasta, Oroville and Folsom reservoirs at 115%, 113%, and 121% of historical average storage. In April, they were still at 101%, 108% and 96% of average. With no rainfall and little snowpack, DWR and the Bureau notified their contractors that water deliveries would be reduced. But they didn’t reduce deliveries. Instead, they actually exported 835,000 acre-feet more water than they said they would be able to deliver. (827 TAF by the state water project)

This increase in exports caused:

1. Water quality standards to be violated in the Delta, which devastated Delta smelt in July,
2. The temperature compliance point to be pushed upstream on the Sacramento, which hammered winter-run salmon spawning,
3. Abrupt Sacramento River flow reductions in the fall, which killed 20-40% of fall-run salmon eggs,
4. And reservoir storage to be reduced to dangerous levels, with no margin of safety.

And this year, like most previous years, the State Water Board assured the projects that it would not undertake any enforcement for these multiple violations of water quality standards.

DWR and the Bureau ignored history and gambled that rain would come: they lost. A subsequent dry Fall/Winter has brought us to crisis. Shasta and Oroville storage is 56% of historical average and Folsom is at 35%.

The failure to anticipate a subsequent dry year and reserve sufficient carryover storage to minimize impacts is inexcusable. While god created these dry conditions, it is the colossal mismanagement by the water projects that has brought us to the precipice of disaster.

I should clarify that it is northern California facing disaster. Metropolitan Water District has already announced that they have abundant storage and don’t
contemplate rationing. Their General Manager is quoted as saying the MET will have sufficient water even if dry conditions persist into 2015 and 2016.

Discussions of impending “declaration-of-drought” measures have, at least to date, focused on expediting north-south water transfers, loosening water quality standards, relaxing endangered species requirements, urban rationing and restricting the right of northern California farmers to divert water.

It is suggested that we should discard 150 years of water rights law and precedent and the suite of enacted environmental protections in order to facilitate exports.

DWR and the Bureau’s water rights are junior to virtually all other water rights. They are for “surplus water” and only available when the water needs of senior water rights holders and the areas of origin, including public trust resources, are met. If water shortages exist in northern California, there is simply NO “surplus water” available for export.

South Valley farmers signed contracts for “surplus water.” They now demand this water, even at the expense of the fisheries, farms, communities and economic well being of northern California.

As a fisherman, I note that, while California is experiencing an inevitable sequence of dry years, Central Valley fisheries are in the midst of a decades long man-made fish drought, of increasing severity. Since the state project began exporting water in 1967, population abundance indices of Delta smelt, striped bass, longfin smelt, threadfin shad, American shad and splittail have declined 95.6, 99.6, 99.8, 97.8, 90.9 and 98.5% respectively. Wild steelhead and winter-run salmon are down 91.7 and 95.5%.

We’re witnessing the ecological collapse of an entire estuarial ecosystem – a national treasure as important as the Great Lakes, Everglades, Gulf of Mexico, Chesapeake Bay or Puget Sound.

The State’s obsession with tunneling under the Delta does nothing to address drought, restore fisheries or put us on a path to correct the misuse of limited water supplies.

A much wiser course of action would be to enforce our water code and environmental regulations, require DWR and the Bureau to provide sufficient carryover storage to survive inevitable dry years, balance our use of water with available supplies, provide more flow through the Delta and aggressively pursue new and reliable water through conservation, recycling and reclamation.