



AQUALLIANCE

DEFENDING NORTHERN CALIFORNIA WATERS

Drought Position Paper

The drought bearing down on California threatens to disrupt our economy, our households – our very way of life. Researchers at the University of California confirm that we are now experiencing the driest year in almost five centuries.

Yet that same research also affirms drought is nothing new for California. Indeed, periodic droughts are the norm. The 20th Century, it turns out, was anomalously wet for the state. Over the past few millennia, droughts lasting decades – sometimes a century or more – have periodically ravaged the region. Even during the relatively lush, wet 20th Century, California was in drought fully 40 percent of the time. We are a semi-arid state –at times, a *wholly* arid state. Water has always been scarce. And given the impacts of climate change, the situation is likely to become worse, not better.

And yet, there is sufficient water for all Californians, even during drought. There is not, however, any water to waste. State and federal water policies have driven many of our water crises. Our approach to water is inequitable, and often overtly duplicitous. If we are to guarantee a secure economic and civic future for California, we must change the way we obtain and distribute water.

California currently uses about 36 million acre feet of water a year. From 15 to 20 percent of this water is delivered via the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project. Much of the Bay Area, the Central Coast, the San Joaquin Valley and southern California have come to rely on the five to six million acre feet of water delivered by these conveyance projects, which employ a vast system of reservoirs, aqueducts and pumps to deliver water from the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta to the South State.

But these gigantic projects are an antiquated, expensive, environmentally destructive and ultimately unsustainable means of distributing water. We cannot, however, abandon these systems at this time. Too many people depend on them. But we can – in fact, we must – change the way they operate, augmenting their deliveries with more reliable sources.

The best untapped resource available to us is conservation. A tremendous amount of water is wasted in California through sprinkler or flood irrigation, leaky pipes and fixtures, old, high-flow toilets and washing machines and non-native, water intensive landscaping. Simply updating our construction

and landscaping codes and fixing our leaking water mains could save more than 2 million acre feet a year.

Retirement of impaired crop lands in the western San Joaquin Valley would also save a great deal of water. These lands receive taxpayer subsidized water from state and federal projects and return selenium-contaminated drainwater to the San Joaquin River, polluting the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay. These toxic croplands could be retired for less than \$10 billion, with their uses converted to grazing, dry-land farming and wildlife habitat restoration. Selenium pollution would be immediately reduced, and up to two million acre feet of water could be annually dedicated to other uses.

Recycling water is also essential. We have reliable technology to make wastewater potable and safe. Even if we don't want to go that far, we must irrigate landscaping and croplands with reclaimed water wherever possible. Simply recycling the water Californians use each day would save us 2.25 million acre feet a year.

Other avenues are also open to us: rainwater harvest, development of local sources, groundwater desalination, and in some places marine desalination. Up to a million acre feet could be reclaimed if we aggressively pursue these options.

But developing new sources isn't enough. We must also reverse the corrupt policies that have allowed a few wealthy and powerful corporate interests to privatize much of California's public water. Foremost among these needed reforms is the elimination of "paper water."

Paper water is developed water that doesn't exist in the real world, but is counted as an available resource by state bureaucrats and water speculators. It is based on original estimates of State Water Project deliveries from several north state rivers that were never dammed due to their designation as Wild and Scenic rivers.

Because Californians wisely chose to protect the incomparable rivers of the North Coast from destructive diversions, the State Water Project has produced far below its original estimates. But corporate water interests and their state allies operate as though this "paper" water is still available for use; the State Water Project in particular takes water from the Delta in accord with the original estimates, as though the rivers now under Wild and Scenic protection are subject to diversions. As a result, water rights claims exceed available water by a factor of five. California is thus in a permanent state of water crisis, independent of the quantity of snow in the Sierra.

We must also restore the so-called "urban preference" that was eliminated in the Monterey Plus Amendments, a 1990s sweetheart deal struck by the state, corporate San Joaquin Valley agribusiness and private water speculators. The urban preference is a bedrock principle of the state water law and was inserted into the original 1960 State Water Project contract. It stipulated that cities would *always* receive priority over agriculture during drought or other water crises: public health and safety, in other words, would always come first.

Without the urban preference, our residential and commercial districts that receive water from the State Water Project are subject to strong-arming by a handful of corporate farmers and private water speculators. A catastrophic drought is looming over California, and it is clear that our cities are

vulnerable to severe water strictures due to the elimination of the urban preference. We must reinstate this essential clause to all SWP contracts to ensure water security for all Californians.

Finally, we must return the Kern Water Bank to public ownership. This vast aquifer west of Bakersfield can be recharged with a million acre feet of water, and was originally designated as drought insurance for south state cities. Water stored here is safe from evaporation, unlike water held in surface reservoirs. Along with eliminating the urban preference, the Monterey Plus Amendments ceded the Kern Water Bank to the Kern Water Agency, which promptly transferred the rights to the aquifer to the Kern Water Bank Authority in 1996.

Under state law, such joint powers authorities can allow private corporations to participate in ownership of public assets. As a consequence, the Kern Water Bank is now controlled by Paramount Farms, a Roll Corporation subsidiary owned by Stewart and Lynda Resnick. The Resnicks are powerful lobbyists for the Democratic Party and close friends of Governor Jerry Brown. This is intolerable. We cannot allow the continued exploitation of a crucial public resource by a few wealthy, politically-connected individuals.

California is in a drought, but the water crisis is largely of our own making. Nature creates drought, but state policies – the perpetuation of paper water, the elimination of the SWP’s urban preference, the seizure of the Kern Water Bank – have instigated the crisis. We have enough water for our cities, for responsible and sustainable farming, and for our fisheries and wildlife, but we must act with dispatch and determination to ensure our water is shared equitably. We can no longer afford the “luxury” of dubious politics and the arrant seizure of public resources.

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