



Myth of California Water Shortfalls

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Op Ed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*

Monday, April 4, 2011

What we hear:

“With abundant rain and above average snowpack, a 55 percent allocation just won't cut it. When other federal service areas are receiving 100 percent of their water and the State Water Project predicts a 70 percent allocation, it is clear the system is broken, period.”

-Reps. Dennis Cardoza, D-Atwater, and Jim Costa, D-Hanford, March 22

“With reservoirs in flood operations, it is inexcusable that farmers are only being allocated 50 percent of the water they have a contract for ...”

-Rep. Jeff Denham, D-Merced, March 21

“On Wednesday, the Department of Water Resources increased the 2011 State Water Project allocation to 70 percent.”

-KMPH Fox 26 News, March 18

“This year, the State Water Project says its deliveries will meet 70 percent of demand.”

-Capitol Weekly, March 17

It is time to pull back the curtain on one of the most common myths of California's water situation - the idea that there is enough water to satisfy 100 percent of “demand.” We hear it: Despite California's abundant rainfall this year, not every user will get 100 percent of what they want. The implication? Some terrible person, or agency, or water policy, or fish is depriving humans of desperately needed water, even in times of record snowpack. This is simply false.

The real problem: The assumption that all water users can have all the water they want all the time and that when 100 percent of such expectations cannot be met, something is wrong.

It has been known for years that California's water system cannot deliver all the water “demanded” by users. The State Water Resources Control Board has acknowledged that there are eight times as many water rights given away as there is water available in an average year. Similarly, the state Court of Appeal ruled in 2000 that the State Water Project-promised water exists only on paper – and constitutes more water than is available for delivery.

There are limits to how much water can be captured, stored and moved. There is no money for huge new projects to capture more, and no more politically or environmentally acceptable places to build them. Taking as much water as we already do is driving fish, plants and other wildlife to extinction.

There is another fundamental flaw in these reports: Almost all of us get all of the water we want, all of the time.

Users with senior water rights, such as the Central Valley Project Exchange Contractors, almost always get 100 percent of their water, drought or no drought. It is those with the most junior water rights who experience “shortages” of their requests, and that is precisely because satisfying their claims depends on water that has never been, and never will be, consistently available.

The good news is that even when farmers and cities get “less than 100 percent” of some desired allocation, California can thrive. During the 2007-09 drought, despite the political posturing and the “Dust Bowl” signs up and down Interstate 5, the total value of California's agricultural products broke all records.

The complex and costly water system we've built in this state with taxpayer dollars provides most of the water to most users most of the time. And the potential to improve water-use efficiency, use recycled water, develop groundwater banking and water markets and cut wasteful uses, means we can continue to have healthy farms and healthy cities.

The problem is water contracts that promise more than can ever be delivered promote false expectations and deceptive sound bites. It is past time to rewrite and reform water rights and bad contracts and put the “100 percent myth” to bed. The Rolling Stones got it right: “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you might find, you get what you need.”