

Sunset of the big engineers

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When President Woodrow Wilson signed the infamous Raker Act into law in 1913, he succumbed to the argument of the city of San Francisco that its water supply was more important to the public interest than the fate of a place that rivaled even Yosemite Valley in beauty and grandeur.

For about 80 years now, the floor of the Hetch Hetchy Valley has rested under 300 feet of water behind O'Shaughnessy Dam in Yosemite National Park. It is symbolic of the arrogance and hubris of California's grand water-transfer projects of the 1900s.

The need for water is just as critical today, with a projected state population growth of 14 million over the next 25 years. But the solutions now are not grand concrete monuments to engineering genius. The good dam sites are taken. And the environmental ethic has swung to the point that a movement is afoot to take out the dam and restore Hetch Hetchy Valley.

The modern solutions are humdrum fixes: more conservation, recycling of used water, better planning, smarter groundwater storage and more realistic consumer water rates. These practical proposals are part of a new study by the Public Policy Institute of California, "Water for Growth: California's New Frontier," by resource economist Ellen Hanak.

The study generally affirms that California is capable of having enough water to meet future demand with existing supplies, a turnabout from years of worry about running out. It also recognizes that finding the water is more a local and regional job than a grand statewide scheme.

This reassurance comes with one big caveat: For decades, farming interests and big developers controlled California's water agenda to their often wasteful benefit. The state's politicians, who avoid both the unglamorously and the political dangers of water issues, now have to demand policies that acknowledge urban and suburban growth and lean hard toward conservation. Here's a basic agenda:

- Develop a statewide groundwater management law that will make it easier to store excess water in natural underground aquifers during wet years for use in dry years.
- Establish incentives for utility customers, both home and business, to switch to drought-resistant, stingily watered plantings rather than thirsty Midwestern-style lawns. Half of all household water is used outdoors and much of that is wasted.
- Create incentives for water reuse, particularly in landscaping.
- Make it easier for farmers to sell their water supplies to cities. Many want to sell these days, but outmoded regulations and practices make it hard. Penalize irrigation of water-intensive crops.

- Require utilities to set rates that reflect the real cost of water supplies while maintaining lifeline rates for the poor. Also, beneficiaries of new projects, such as storage reservoirs for agriculture or to allow new development, must help pay for them.

This is an agenda for immediate action. Wait 25 years, and the old lament that "California is running out of water" will finally come true.