

A Shocking Water Noncrisis

Los Angeles Times, EDITORIAL, June 15, 2005

Having enough water has been a California obsession for nearly a century, pushing the state to build dams, reservoirs and canal systems. Massive quantities of water were shifted from one part of the state to another — primarily from north to south.

But you can't keep building dams forever; eventually you run out of good places to put them, which happened some time ago in California. Built-from-scratch reservoirs that can hold surplus water in wet years for use during dry years are costly and hard to site.

The state's chief water agency is now looking elsewhere for answers, and happily predicts that it can provide for the future with less dependence on new reservoirs, canals and dams.

The proposed California Water Plan, the subject of extensive hearings throughout the state, calls for renewed emphasis on urban and farm conservation, more storage in groundwater basins, recycling of urban water and desalination of runoff from farms (which is a lot easier than desalinating saltier seawater).

The plan sees a fundamental shift away from grand statewide plans toward more efficient regional management of water supplies, more water trading and restoration of depleted groundwater basins.

That doesn't mean coasting along with the state's current supply and usage. The plan notes, "By wringing every bit of utility from every drop of water, Californians can stretch water supplies and help ensure continued economic, social and environmental health." Translation: It's not cheap, and it won't come without sacrifice.

The plan emphasizes maintenance of the aging water delivery system, including the canals and pumps of the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project, both of which pump supplies from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to cities and farms to the south. This includes strengthening hundreds of miles of aging earthen levees that corral the delta water and prevent it from spreading across miles of farmland. A massive delta levee collapse, possibly from an earthquake, could cut off a major source of Southern California's water supply.

The newfound ability to stretch existing supplies stems in part from sophisticated farm water systems, such as drip irrigation, that reduce loss through evaporation and runoff. Some farm regions also are lining dirt canals to cut seepage. Other savings come from underground storage, which also prevents evaporation loss. In the San Joaquin Valley, suburban sprawl is converting crops to housing tracts that consume far less water.

Water district managers are still seeking more surface reservoirs, but the emphasis now is on making sure that the beneficiaries, whether urban districts or farm regions, pay the cost.

A proposal to increase the capacity of delta pumps by about 25% so more water can be exported to the south remains part of a "delta improvements package." But there has been a sudden plunge in fish life in the delta, possibly linked to heavy pumping over the last three years. Pumping should not be expanded until more is known about the reasons for this crisis.

It would be too much to expect a problem-free future when it comes to water in this thirsty state. But for a change, most of the news is encouraging.