



April 2018

Will We Ever Build More Water Storage in California?

BY KERRY JACKSON

It's not elected officials' fault if it doesn't rain. But they are largely responsible for the issues that arise when it doesn't. That's why California's most-recent drought was often referred to as man-made. The next one, which will reportedly arrive this year, should carry the same label.

Last year, Gov. Jerry Brown declared that the state's six-year drought, maybe the worst in 500 years, was over. A season of unusually heavy rain, snow and sleet brought blessed relief. But Brown conceded last spring that the danger had not passed and warned that "the next drought could be around the corner."

"Conservation must remain a way of life," he said.

A year earlier, Brown issued an executive order which "instructed state agencies to help Californians adopt permanent changes to use water more wisely." The Administration's "Making Water Conservation a California Way of Life" report insists that "all Californians must embrace and make part of their daily lives the principles of wise water use."

Clearly, the state has failed to properly manage California's water resources. At one time, this state aggressively built dams, reservoirs, and aqueducts to sustain its swelling population, industry and agricultural production. Farsighted water projects allowed the Central Valley to grow into the greatest farmland in the world, the Bay Area to thrive, and Los Angeles to become, well, Los Angeles.

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But that was a different era with different thinking. Since the 1970s, even as the population continued to grow, water projects have become as gridlocked as Los Angeles rush-hour traffic.

“The budget allotments are exactly opposite of those 50 years ago, given we now spend in percentage terms on entitlements and health care what we used to spend on infrastructure and vice versa,” Hoover Institute fellow and lifelong California farmer Victor Davis Hanson recently told the Pacific Research Institute. He notes that the cost overrun alone on the high-speed rail’s first leg “would have paid for the cost of the three key dams . . . which might have given 6 to 7 million-acre feet of storage.”

“If you do not include mini-projects or Los Angeles County and city storage projects for municipal purposes, the last great dam and reservoir was the New Melones Dam of 1979,” Hanson said.

There’s a straight line from decades of indifference and dereliction to the State Water Resources Control Board considering a permanent regulatory regime in which violators will be fined as much as \$500 for seven (plus one) deadly water usage sins:

Hosing off sidewalks and driveways with potable water.

Watering grass beyond the point of “incidental runoff.”

Washing cars with hoses that don’t have automatic shutoff nozzles.

Running fountains or “decorative water features” that don’t recirculate water.

Watering lawns “during and within 48 hours following measurable rainfall.”

Serving drinking water in restaurants and bars when it hasn’t been requested.

Hotels and motels washing “towels and linens daily without providing guests the option of using them again.”

These restrictions might be acceptable in the Third World where undeveloped economies cannot satisfy infrastructure needs. But they should never be acceptable in California.

Outside of a needless and overpriced bullet train, state officials are clearly afraid to build infrastructure. Yes, voters passed a \$7.5 billion water bond proposal -- Proposition 1 -- by a two-thirds majority in 2014. It included \$2.7 billion for water storage - the amount needed to build the proposed Sites and Temperance Flat reservoirs. But the state water board has not allocated one dollar yet for increased storage. The lack of progress, says Hanson, is due to “a political decision not to offend environmentalists.”

Meanwhile, Brown’s proposed twin tunnels were downsized recently to a single tunnel in hopes that it will be more acceptable cost-wise. Don’t be surprised if it’s eventually downsized to no project at all.

As officials and special interests wrestle over these ideas, Central Valley farmers beg for more water and 25 million in Southern California are scorched by another drought. These conditions were avoidable, but politicians decided to rely on weather, which they can’t control, rather than pragmatic public policy, which they can.

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