BAY AREA WATER SUPPLY AND CONSERVATION AGENCY
BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

March 20, 2014

Media coverage of interest between February 26, 2014 and March 13, 2014

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Article: Gov. Brown asked to reconsider zero-water allocations

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Other News

Date: January 23, 2014
Source: Modesto Bee
Article: Modesto Irrigation District blocks Oakdale water sale to SF for now

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Emergency water supply used to fight San Francisco fire

SF Gate, Jaxon Van Derbeken

Thursday, March 13, 2014

Firefighters battling the five-alarm Mission Bay blaze had to tap into San Francisco's rarely used emergency backup water supply when regular sources proved inadequate, officials said Wednesday.

The regular system of mains and hydrants could not provide enough water pressure for the 90 fire engines and trucks that after 5 p.m. Tuesday converged on the burning building, an apartment complex under construction at Fourth and China Basin streets, Fire Department officials said.

As a result, firefighters had to drag 5-inch-diameter hoses several blocks to tap into the city's network of high-pressure emergency fire hydrants, which are fed by gravity from a pair of tanks - the Twin Peaks Reservoir, which holds 10.5 million gallons, and the Jones Street Tank on Nob Hill that contains 750,000 gallons.

The system, which dates to 1913, eventually gave firefighters enough water to control the blaze. But it required time to hook up; dragging the heavy-duty hoses to hydrants hundreds of yards away took more than 30 minutes, firefighters said.

In the meantime, crews used the existing supply to spray a "water curtain" to keep the fire from jumping to other buildings.

"The first step in the puzzle is to increase the domestic water supply," said Assistant Deputy Chief Ken Lombardi. "In a regular fire, if we have enough pressure at that point, game over, that's all we use."

There was only one high-pressure hydrant in the immediate area of the fire, however. Fire crews had to pick their way through other construction sites with their hoses and steel connectors needed to hook up to the more distant hydrants.

"That takes some time," said Mindy Talmadge, a Fire Department spokeswoman. "The first, main focus was protecting the surrounding structures. Once they got the (water pressure), they could deal with both situations at the same time."

Water flow from the backup system may have been slowed by the temporary absence of a third backup reservoir, a 500,000-gallon-capacity reservoir at Clayton Street and Twin Peaks Boulevard known as the Ashbury tank. It is being replaced, leaving the city with just the Twin Peaks and Jones reservoirs plus a pair of pumping stations that draw from San Francisco Bay.

Lombardi said the emergency system worked well once firefighters connected to it, and that it enabled firefighters to direct large amounts of water to put out the stubborn inferno.

"That was our biggest fire" in several years, Lombardi noted. "I thought it went off pretty flawlessly."

The system delivers water to lower-lying areas from the Twin Peaks Reservoir, which is 758 feet above sea level, and the Jones Street tank, which is at 369 feet. It was designed after the 1906

earthquake and fire by Michael O'Shaughnessy, the city engineer who also designed the Hetch Hetchy water system.
High-pressure hydrants have black, red or blue caps, distinguishing them from the smaller, all-white hydrants that deliver water from the regular supply. Not all the city is covered; there are few or no high-pressure hydrants in the Sunset, Richmond and Excelsior neighborhoods and around San Francisco State University.
A $400 million bond measure that would expand the system will be on the June ballot.

"After last night," Lombardi said, "you could see how important this would be to have this citywide."

Jaxon Van Derbeken is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail:jvanderbeken@sfchronicle.com

East Bay Water District Eyes Emergency Supply From Sacramento River

KQED News Jack Detsch | March 13, 2014

With the reality that rainfall and the Sierra Nevada snowpack will be far short of normal this year, the East Bay's largest water district is getting ready to tap an emergency water source that it took decades of legal battles and engineering work to secure.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District, which serves 1.3 million customers in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, will decide next month whether to switch on a pumping plant on the Sacramento River to supplement supplies it gets from its big Mokelumne River reservoirs.

It would mark the first time EBMUD has used a supply of water it first arranged to purchase from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1970. The agreement would have allowed the district to pump as much as 150,000 acre-feet of emergency water from the American River east of Sacramento. After decades of environmental litigation, the district became partners with the Sacramento County Water Agency in a $900 million project that looks much different from the original plan.

The two agencies jointly built a pumping plant on the Sacramento River in Freeport, just south of the capital city. The plant, opened in 2011, allows EBMUD to ship water from the Sacramento through a series of canals to its Mokelumne Aqueduct, which serves the East Bay. Under its contract with the Bureau of Reclamation, EBMUD can draw on the Sacramento River supply only during dry years.

"EBMUD wouldn't access that water at all unless it was a situation like this, which is a drought year," EBMUD spokeswoman Andrea Pook says. The district will decide whether to request the emergency water next month, she says, after the spring and summer runoff forecast is clearer.

EBMUD's reservoirs are at 63 percent of capacity, even after a series of February storms. Camanche Reservoir, the district's largest storage facility, is less than half full.

So far, the district has asked customers for a voluntary, and relatively modest, 10 percent reduction in water use. Several other districts are calling for deeper cuts. The Santa Clara Valley Water District has asked consumers to reduce use by 20 percent. The Marin Municipal Water District has requested a 25 percent voluntary reduction.

"The district may decide that additional conservation would be enough," Pook says. "It could say that we do need that water from the Sacramento River. It could be a combination."

Just how much water EBMUD can get from the Sacramento will depend on how much state and federal officials decide can be diverted from the river, which is experiencing very low flows because of the drought.

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Bay Area: Do You Know Where Your Water Comes From?

Lauren Sommer, KQED Science | February 28, 2014 | 3 Comments

The Bay Area water system is a byzantine patchwork of agencies — more than 50 in all — that provides water to customers. Some are the ones you see on your water bill. Others are middlemen that provide water to local agencies at the the wholesale level.

And some of that water makes a long journey. Southern California has the reputation for tapping far-flung sources for its water needs, but the Bay Area is in the same boat.

More than two-thirds of the Bay Area's water supply comes from outside the region, which means in extreme drought years like this one, local water districts are competing with many others around the state for limited supplies.

Hetch Hetchy Water System
The system originates more than 100 miles from its primary customers, in Yosemite National Park. O'Shaughnessy Dam was built on the Tuolumne River in 1923 to create Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. The water travels through a series of pipelines before it reaches the Bay Area and blends with five local reservoirs. The Tuolumne River joins the San Joaquin River and flows into the Delta.

In 2012, advocates of restoring Hetch Hetchy Valley put a measure on the San Francisco ballot that would have required the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to study draining the reservoir and shifting the water to other storage facilities. The measure was defeated.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta
California's two major rivers, the Sacramento and San Joaquin, fed by half a dozen others, come together in this inland delta just east of San Francisco Bay. The Delta's watershed makes up about 45 percent of the state in all. Two-thirds of Californians use Delta water, delivered mainly through two major canal systems, the State Water Project and the Central Valley Project.

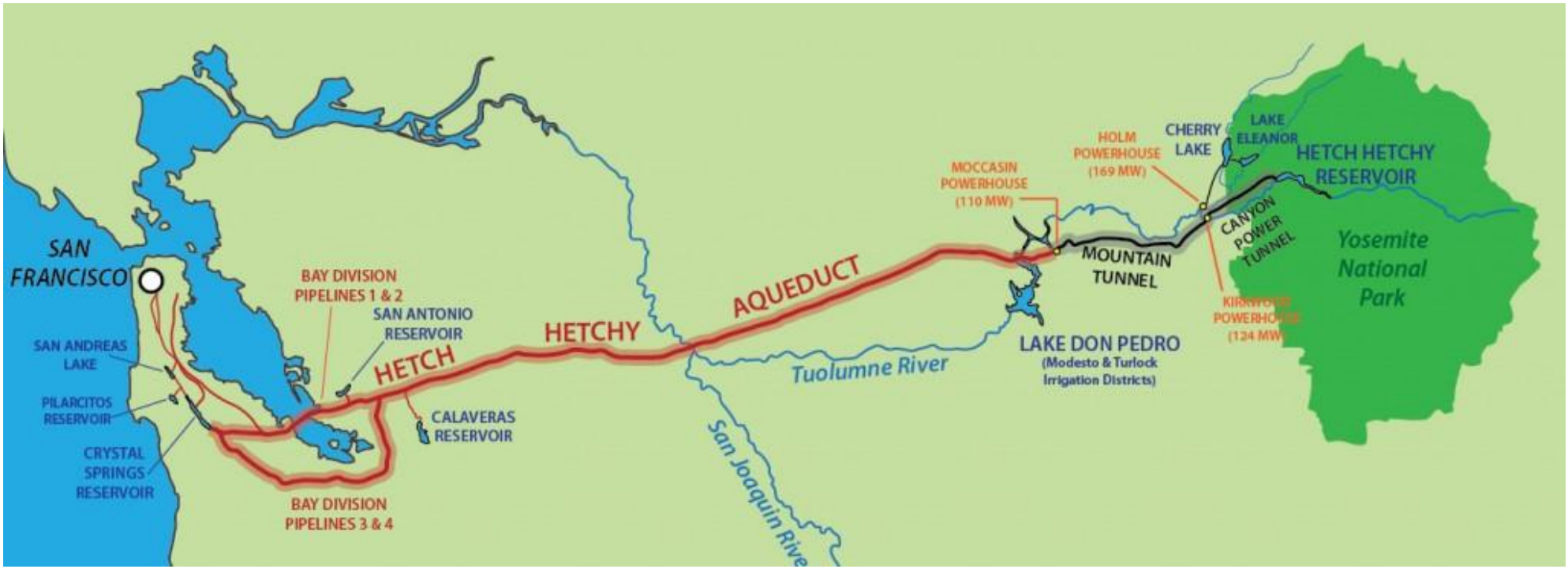
With the prolonged drought, water officials have warned that there could be no water deliveries from either project this year, except for some drinking water supplies. The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta has seen dramatic ecological decline due to habitat loss, invasive species and highly altered water flow.

Russian River Water System
The 110-mile Russian River begins north of the Bay Area in Mendocino County and flows south until it reaches the Pacific Ocean west of Santa Rosa. There are three major reservoirs that are part of the water system.

Mokelumne River Water System
This river originates in the Central Sierra Nevada and flows west until it reaches the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and San Francisco Bay. The East Bay Municipal Utility District built Pardee Dam on the river near Stockton in 1929. Water is delivered to the Bay Area through the 85-mile Mokelumne Aqueduct, which diverts the river's water before it reaches the Delta.

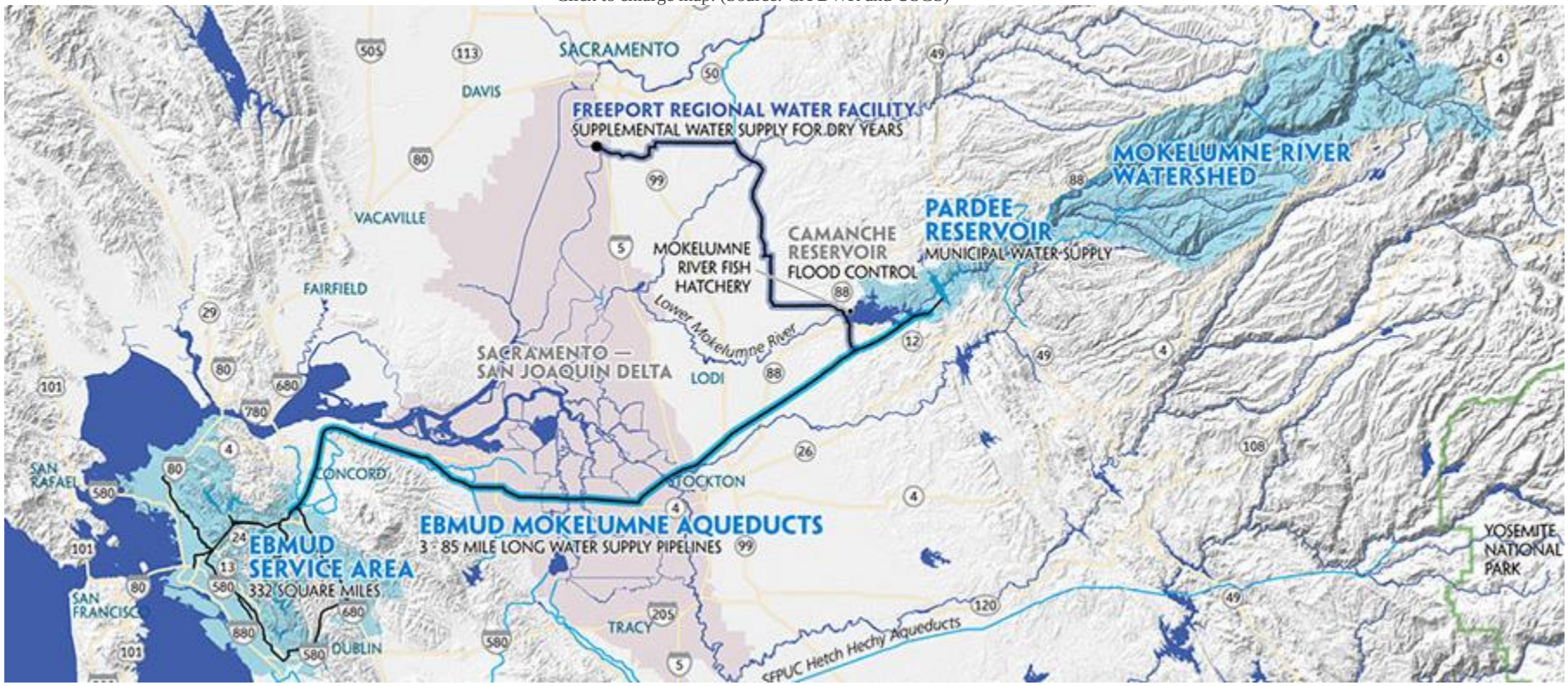
Lake Berryessa
The 23 mile-long reservoir was created in Napa County in the 1950s, when the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation built Monticello Dam on Putah Creek.

Local Water Supplies
Many water districts use water from the surrounding watershed. It comes from local streams and rivers, fed by rainfall or is pumped from underground aquifers. Some districts also recycle water, which is primarily used for landscape irrigation.



Click to enlarge map. (Credit: By Shannon1 via Wikimedia Commons)

Click to enlarge map. (Source: CA DWR and USGS)



Click to enlarge map. (Source: EBMUD)

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SF’s water agency faces fiscal 'disaster'

SF Examiner, by Chris Roberts
Feb. 26, 2014

A financial “disaster” is staring the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission in the face, as The City’s provider of drinking water and public electricity has $467.7 million worth of work to do over the next decade on the network of pipes and tunnels that delivers water from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir — and no immediate way to pay for it all.

“It’s a description of a disaster,” SFPUC commissioner Anson Moran said Feb. 11. “It’s not a plan for survival. ... We need a 10-year plan. And we don’t have one.”

Driving the deficit is the recently discovered need to rebuild or replace a 12-mile-long underground conduit called Mountain Tunnel. Continuously in service since the 1920s, with only “minimal” maintenance done in that time, the tunnel delivers 85 percent of the 265 million gallons of water the SFPUC provides a day. It also connects The City’s main hydroelectric power station with its water source in Yosemite National Park.

Inspections conducted last summer revealed the tunnel needs to be repaired or replaced.

The SFPUC needs $628 million or more to fix the tunnel, a major unexpected cost that is leading to a budget deficit agency officials have dubbed a “fiscal cliff.”

No funding source for the repair has yet been identified, but some potential solutions include the SFPUC, which sells most of the water it delivers to cities such as Palo Alto and San Jose, adding customers. The agency could raise rates on existing customers, including The City’s homes and businesses.

The SFPUC plans to make a decision by June, agency General Manager Harlan Kelly said.

The sudden news of Mountain Tunnel’s fragility, which comes after much of the Hetch Hetchy water system underwent a major seismic-safety upgrade, was “sudden and alarming,” according to Nicole Sandkulla, CEO of the Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency, which represents the 1.7 million people on the Peninsula and in San Jose who buy water from the SFPUC.

The earliest the tunnel could be repaired or replaced is 2022, according to SFPUC documents.

In the meantime, the SFPUC needs to craft a short-term emergency plan in the event the tunnel collapses, Sandkulla said.

That could come as early as March, before the blueprint for a long-term fix is due in June.

“It’s a single conduit through which 85 percent of our water” is delivered, she said. “Without it, we’re cut off ... That’s pretty significant.“

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New study predicts fewer rainy days in CA's future

Southern California Public Radio

Sanden Totten | March 13th, 2014, 6:34am

It's drier days ahead for California, according to a new study from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

The researchers used a new way of analyzing computer models to predict rain levels across the globe.

They found that by the end of the century, California could see as many as ten more dry days per year.

RELATED: 'Mega-Drought:' Could California's drought last years? A century?

The study's lead author Suraj Polade said California should expect much more variation in it's weather as well.

"We can have one year with drought and one year with flooding," he said.

Across the globe, there could be up to 30 additional dry days, the study found. Much of this will be centered in regions like the Amazon, Central America, Indonesia, and areas with Mediterranean climates.

For many water strapped regions, this likely means rainy days will be fewer and far-between. Some rainy regions, like the tropics, will likely see more moisture.

Stephen Jackson, director of the U.S. Department of the Interior Southwest Climate Science Center, which co-funded the study, says these changes will have "direct effects on vegetation and soil moisture."

The changes are attributed to human-caused climate change. Polade said some of the drying trend could be reversed if work is done to limit carbon emission's now.

This study was unique in how it aimed to predict weather patterns on a day to day level, unlike monthly or yearly climate predictions. It was published in *Scientific Reports*, an open-access journal from Nature Publishing Group.

How has the drought affected your local world? Share photos and stories with us on Facebook,Twitter and Instagram using the hashtag #MyDrought.

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Coke Hallowell and George Folsom: We must team up on water issues

BY COKE HALLOWELL AND GEORGE FOLSOM

Fresno Bee March 12, 2014

There are some tough decisions to be made in order to stretch California's limited water supply in this time of extreme drought.

While every sector of the state has individual water needs that must be met, we also have to look at the bigger picture. California has more people than any other state, and our well-being is dependent on finding solutions that ensure safe drinking water for every community, provide sufficient irrigation for farmers and protect our irreplaceable natural resources.

The state has worked hard to deal with the drought in a responsible way to find balance for all competing water needs, recently passing a near-unanimous bipartisan drought relief bill signed by the governor on March 1. Proposed federal legislation, authored by California's U.S. Senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, also has the opportunity to advance these efforts to ensure every water user in California is considered. President Barack Obama's February visit to the San Joaquin Valley focused on effects of the drought, highlighted the federal government's announcement of an "all-in" effort to help California address the public health, economic, and environmental ramifications of the drought.

However, the government can only do so much; we're counting on the people of California to do their part.

Although the recent and welcome wet weather will help, it is highly likely that we will end the rainy season far below average. We will need more than rain to help us through this crisis; Californians need to rethink how we use — and waste — water, because there is a lot less water available to use. Conservation is the key to the future of our communities, economy and environment.

Gov. Jerry Brown has called for all Californians to reduce water usage by 20%. Communities in Southern California have already made significant strides in conservation, with the result that they are in less danger of running out of water than other parts of the state. They've shown by example opportunities for improved conservation, water recycling, storm water capture and other tools that can be employed in other communities.

By endorsing and emulating these efforts, we will minimize damage to our precious natural resources that draw tourists who contribute to our economy and thus to the quality of life Californians expect. With these positive outcomes in mind, we should all muster our efforts and work together toward these shared conservation goals that will benefit everyone.

As we all struggle toward solutions, we must take care not to sacrifice any one interest for another. Unfortunately, some of our local officials are trying to divide Valley residents for political reasons rather than finding solutions that work.

One example is the proposal to permanently stop the effort to restore our San Joaquin River. Decision makers, including Sen. Feinstein, were very thoughtful when they pulled together agricultural water districts, fishermen

and environmentalists to find fair and balanced solutions to restoring the river. In extremely dry years like this one, the restoration program does not require the release of any water for restoration purposes, reserving the water for our farms and cities.

The effort to stop the restoration program is a misguided job killer. Not only would it not provide any more water to address our current drought, it would deny our communities hundreds of millions of dollars in investments and thousands of jobs; according to a study by a UC Merced economist, the San Joaquin River Restoration Project will create 11,000 jobs through river restoration activities and by helping our communities capture more tourism and recreation dollars.

Instead of putting politics first, let's work together to minimize the harm the current drought would otherwise cause to our farmers and other Valley residents, and continue our restoration and other efforts that can improve our quality of life and create thousands of jobs for Valley residents.

Californians take pride in our farms, our forests, rivers and streams, and in finding innovative solutions to problems. Our state desperately needs a drought resistant water supply that can sustain both our economy and our environment.

It is urgent that we all begin working toward that goal today.

Californians need to rethink how we use water because there is a lot less water available to use. Conservation is the key to the future of our communities, economy and environment.

News

'NOBODY'S GOING TO GET THE AMOUNT OF WATER THEY ARE HOPING FOR,' SAYS SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR AS SHE TOURS SOUTH DELTA EXPORT PUMPS IN S.J.

By ***Alex Breitler***
March 12, 2014
Record Staff Writer

TRACY - President Barack Obama's lead adviser on water and wildlife toured the enormous south Delta export pumps Tuesday, examining the roaring, 22,500-horsepower pumps before cautioning that no one would receive all the water they need this year.

U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell told reporters that state and federal governments will have to be flexible to make the best use of a limited amount of water.

"Mother Nature has created this drought," she said. "This drought is not created by the Bureau of Reclamation or the state of California. Working together, we can put as much flexibility in place as possible to satisfy as many users as possible, recognizing that nobody's going to get the amount of water they are hoping for."

Events of the past week, however, show how difficult it might be to manage the state's vast water infrastructure in the coming months.

Recent storms temporarily boosted the amount of water flowing through the Delta, west of Stockton. But by the middle of last week, San Joaquin Valley farmers had grown frustrated because most of that water was not being pumped their way. Instead, it was left in rivers flowing toward the ocean.

"I ask you, is this the balance that you anticipated?" Dan Nelson, general manager of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, asked a state water official at a drought workshop in Merced last week. "Is this the balance you anticipated? I don't think so."

By last weekend, exports from the state and federal pumps near Tracy had increased to more than 7,000 cubic feet per second combined. That's enough water to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool in 12 seconds.

The farmers down south were getting more water. But now the additional pumping was beginning to harm fish.

As the pumps cranked up, Delta streams began running backward toward the pumps at a higher rate. Endangered winter-run Chinook salmon were sucked into the pumps - a total of 121 juvenile salmon in the past week, according to government records.

More than two dozen steelhead and a few splittail and longfin smelt also began to show up at the pumps.

"It's crucial that pumping be restrained while baby salmon that have so far survived the drought pass through and around the Delta," said John McManus, director of the Golden Gate Salmon Association.

The numbers aren't high enough to trigger emergency actions to save the fish, but the week's events show how quickly the pendulum can swing as officials attempt to find the "flexibility" that Jewell touted Tuesday.

California Natural Resources Secretary John Laird said after her remarks that officials are still trying to find an appropriate balance.

And there's nothing new about that. But the drought is turning a microscope on daily or even hourly management decisions once considered more routine.

"(Water supplies) have just never been so low that the day-to-day (operations) are so dramatic," Laird said.

Jewell said she came Tuesday to hear perspectives of people suffering from the drought. That discussion was aimed mostly toward Central Valley Project users who benefit from increased Delta exports. But, asked if she

would have similar conversations with Delta interests, Jewell said it's important to hear from a range of perspectives and said this wouldn't be her last trip to California.

She called Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed twin tunnels an "important potential solution for people to consider seriously," though she said there were many unanswered questions including the size of the tunnels.

"We are riding on an infrastructure that we built many decades ago," Jewell said. "We are putting more demands on that infrastructure than it was intended to serve."

Contact reporter Alex Breitler at (209) 546-8295 or abreitler@recordnet.com. Follow him at recordnet.com/breitlerblog and on Twitter @alexbreitler.

Capitol Hearing Explores Sustainable Groundwater Management

ACWA, by Pamela Martineau on Tue, 03/11/2014 - 4:01pm

Groundwater management should remain under the purview of local agencies and the state should step in only as a "back stop" when local efforts aren't proving sufficient.

That was the overarching message from state officials Tuesday during a joint legislative hearing on improving management of the state's groundwater resources. Several local and state officials addressed the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee which met jointly with Assembly Budget Committee #3 on Resources and Transportation..

Speakers described the overdraft of the state's groundwater, saying that the drought only exacerbates the problem. The California Department of Water Resources (DWR) estimates that California is overdrafting its groundwater at a rate of 1.5 million acre-feet a year. NASA estimates that groundwater overdraft in the state may be closer to 4.4 million acre-feet.

Steve Moore, a member of the State Water Resources Control Board (State Board), updated lawmakers on the state's efforts to build a support system for local entities to help them monitor and maintain sustainable groundwater management programs. Moore said groundwater is best monitored locally.

"It requires local knowledge and local management," Moore said.

Moore added that in October 2013 the State Board released a concept paper in which it outlined five key areas where the state may be of assistance in helping local, regional and, if needed, state entities manage groundwater. Those areas are: establishing sustainable thresholds, monitoring and assessment, governance, funding, and oversight and enforcement.

Also, Moore said, expanding groundwater storage capacity and improving groundwater management is a major objective of the Brown Administration's California Water Action Plan (CWAP).

Local officials also described their agencies' efforts in managing groundwater resources. Michael R. Markus, general manager of the Orange County Water District, said his board sets rates for groundwater pumping. If landowners or other entities exceed a certain threshold for pumping, they must pay a higher rate to pump.

"So there is an economic incentive not to (over pump)," said Markus.

Markus added that his agency purchases untreated water from Metropolitan Water District of Southern California to use to recharge its aquifers.

Joan Maher, deputy operating officer for Santa Clara Valley Water District, said that "successful groundwater management is really about successful water management." Promoting sustainability in all areas of water management – surface and below ground – helps to protect the resource, she said.

Maher added that her county has been doing conjunctive use water management for years.

Whitnie Wiley, senior legislative advocate for ACWA, told lawmakers that ACWA published a groundwater framework in 2011 that outlines recommendations that local and state agencies can take for groundwater sustainability. She said ACWA Past President Randy Record last year established a groundwater sustainability task force that will release its recommendations in mid-April.

Wiley said ACWA believes strongly that groundwater should be managed at the local level.

"Local and regional agencies are the most knowledgeable about local issues and challenges," said Wiley.

"We do recognize that the state may need to act as a back stop," she added.

Wiley said ACWA and its members stand ready to collaborate further with other entities on developing groundwater sustainability guidelines.

The meeting agenda, a report from the Legislative Analyst's Office and other background materials are available here.

Governor’s Office Creates Local Government Drought Toolkit

Submitted by Matt Williams on Tue, 03/11/2014 - 5:05pm

The Governor’s Office of Planning and Research (OPR) has created a new toolkit for local governments that provides guidance for coordinating on drought response and meeting the governor’s call for a 20% reduction in water use.

The document, available here, contains a list of regional contacts for the Office of Emergency Services, State Water Board and other water-related state agencies; templates for a proclamation declaring a local drought emergency or a resolution calling for voluntary water conservation; web links to drought information and resources for local governments; and water-related curricula for grades K-12.

The tools were designed with city and counties in mind, and are appropriate for use by water districts, officials said.

Gov. Jerry Brown’s administration is encouraging local governments to enact water use reduction plans at their facilities, share well data, pursue emergency drinking water grants if necessary, and update local ordinances to encourage water conservation.

OPR has launched a Local Drought Clearinghouse to ensure local governments can quickly access the toolkit and other resources. For more information, contact Debbie Davis, local drought liaison, at (916) 327-0068 or drought.clearinghouse@opr.ca.gov.

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Gov. Brown asked to reconsider zero-water allocations

Published:March 11. 2014 11:13AM

Tim Hearden/Capital Press

A California state senator has asked Gov. Jerry Brown to consider alternatives to the State Water Project's zero-water allocation for agriculture, which he said would be devastating to farmers and the economy.

SACRAMENTO — A California state senator wants Gov. Jerry Brown to consider alternatives to a zero-water allocation for agriculture, which he said would be devastating to farmers and the state's economy.

Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber, told the governor the state's 80,500 farms and ranches earned a record $44.7 billion for their output in 2011 and that their productivity would be affected by a denial of water from the State Water Project.

"Given your family's roots in the North State, you know the importance of farming and its significance to the region and the state economy," Nielsen, a rancher, told Brown, whose family owns ranchland in Colusa County.

"Water is a scarce resource, and California is suffering from an historic drought," Nielsen wrote. "All users must share the scarcity equally. This is a much more equitable way to divide the allocation of water for the benefit of all users – farmers and residential."

Should the no-water policy go into effect, farmers will not be able to water their trees, crops and livestock and dairy and cattle herds would be reduced, Nielsen told the governor. As a result, consumers still recovering from the recent recession will face higher prices at the grocery store, he wrote.

The senator plans to work with those affected by the shutoff and wants Brown to hold "collaborative meetings" with farmers and others "to present constructive alternative solutions to zero supply," Nielsen spokeswoman Nghia Nguyen said in an email.

The state Water Resources Control Board has already approved a petition by project water users to temporarily forgo a requirement that enough water be let out of storage to meet fish standards, chairwoman Felicia Marcus said.

However, the state must be certain that enough water remains in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta for salinity control, Marcus said.

"If salinity control were lost, water in the Delta would be too salty for any uses in the Delta or for export, so it is in everyone's interest that the projects figure this out, which is what they are now doing," she said.

The State Water Project announced in late January that most agricultural customers would get no deliveries in 2014 if dry conditions persisted and that Sacramento Valley water districts with long-standing water rights may only get 50 percent.

As expected, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation followed suit in late February, announcing it expects to have no water available for farms without senior water rights either north or south of the Delta. Senior rights holders along the Sacramento River are slated to get 40 percent.

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Modesto Bee

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Modesto Irrigation District blocks Oakdale water sale to SF, for now

By Garth Stapley

gstapley@modbee.comJanuary 23, 2014 Updated 10 hours ago

The Modesto Irrigation District building in downtown Modesto is seen here in 2011.

TRACY BARBUTES — Modesto Bee

- Related Stories:
- Oakdale Irrigation District sets closed session to discuss water sale
- OID reveals proposal to sell water to Westlands Water District
-

AT A GLANCE

The MID board meets publicly at 9 a.m. today in the last of a series of orientation meetings aimed mostly at three new board members, and will go behind closed doors to discuss lawsuits and competitor Pacific Gas and Electric Co.'s request to a state agency to increase its power rates. The meeting takes place at the district office, 1231 11th St., Modesto.

MODESTO — The Modesto Irrigation District, which dropped a hotly contested proposal to sell water to San Francisco two years ago, temporarily has stopped the Oakdale Irrigation District from doing the same thing.

However, MID's blockage could be removed someday when the district finishes creating a policy addressing highly controversial water transfers.

With such a framework, MID could facilitate OID's deal with San Francisco, "and potentially much more," MID Board Chairman Nick Blom said last week in a "not yet" letter to OID leaders.

In light of news that OID is negotiating separate, much larger sales to wealthy water buyers to the south, Blom on Thursday said MID has not talked recently about shopping its water. But MID leaders do envision short-term sales sometime in the future, if the district can store up enough extra without hurting local farmers, Blom said.

OID has been talking about paying some of its customers to fallow their land and selling water that would have been used there to thirsty districts in the Fresno area and beyond. Because of the drought, OID might not have enough to spare from its mountain snowmelt via the Stanislaus River, but the district intends to pump more than 5 billion gallons of groundwater this year, or five times more than normal.

That could threaten the wells of nearby farms and residents. "If their plan is just to continue pumping, that's not a good thing for anyone," Blom said Thursday.

OID, an active player in the water transfer market, has improved its canals and other facilities with $51 million reaped in recent water sales, the district said in a "briefing paper" on its proposed deal with San Francisco.

In October, the OID board agreed to accept San Francisco's $112,000 option, plus an undetermined fee for 730 million gallons of OID water in a one-time deal this year.

But the agreement depends on MID's blessing because it shares a connection with San Francisco on the Tuolumne River, and OID does not. MID would give some of its allotment to the city and receive a like amount from OID through a canal connection near Albers Road and Dusty Lane, between Modesto and Waterford, and MID would get 10 percent of the option and sales revenue for its trouble, according to the OID pitch.

Similar agreements between the Oakdale and Modesto utilities date to 1917 and were used regularly to fulfill state government demands for better fish habitat in the Tuolumne from 1998 through 2010.

But this time, MID said "no," at least for now.

MID leaders don't want to trade their pure river water for OID's canal water, which is tainted to some degree with tailwater, or leftovers after draining from Oakdale customers' farms. The MID board has not been satisfied, Blom said, with OID's assurances regarding water quality.

Further, MID is more interested in "a comprehensive agreement covering the long term" than in a one-time deal, Blom said in the letter. He also chastised OID for "inferring MID's participation in any water transfer" at OID meetings "or with the media."

Tom Orvis of the Stanislaus County Farm Bureau said it makes sense for MID and OID to "at least explore opportunities" for cooperation in a formal framework.

On Thursday, Blom said the MID board has not talked about paying customers to fallow their land. "To me, district water is there for your district and not for you just to sell. I'd rather keep growing here and not make as much money," he said.

OID General Manager Steve Knell could not be reached Thursday for this report. His district has sold water over the years to Stockton-area taps and to a federal agency boosting fishery flows. Last year, OID sold more than 13 billion gallons to irrigation districts on the southwest side of the San Joaquin Valley, including Fresno-based Westlands Water District. Those transfers were handled on the Stanislaus River and did not require MID permission.

Last year, OID offered to sell water to the Modesto and Turlock irrigation districts, and in another deal, MID agreed to sell water to TID. But all of those ideas were dropped for various reasons, including an uptick in TID groundwater pumping to augment its surface water.

MID's proposed sale to San Francisco fell apart in 2012 amid concerns over having enough for local farmers in dry years.

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