BAY AREA WATER SUPPLY AND CONSERVATION AGENCY
BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

July 10, 2026

Correspondence and media coverage of interest between June 17, 2026 and July 7, 2026

From:	Dennis J. Herrera, SFPUC, General Manager
To:	Diane Papan, Assemblymember
	Catherine Stefani, Assemblymember
	Matt Haney, Assemblymember
CC:	Louis Vella, BAWSCA Chair
	Tom Smegal, BAWSCA CEO/General Manager
Date:	June 24, 2026
Subject:	Millbrae Operations Center Improvement Project

From:	Peter Drekmeier, Yosemite Rivers Alliance Policy Director
To:	SFPUC President Arce and Commissioners
cc:	BAWSCA Board of Directors
Date:	June 19, 2026
Subject:	2025 Urban Water Management Plan (UWMP) and Reservoir Storage

Water Supply Conditions:

Date:	July 5, 2026
Source:	California Water Blog
Article:	Wet Season's end for Water Year 2026

Date:	June 23, 2026
Source;	The Plumas Sun
Article:	Fire and ice: 'Snow drought' could impact water, wildfire

Water Supply Management:

Date:	June 18, 2026
Source:	Northern California Water
Article:	California Begins a new Era of Water Planning

Date:	June 18, 2026
Source:	Daily Post
Article:	Palo Alto officials say San Francisco's PUC is hoarding water

Water Infrastructure:

Date:	June 22, 2026
Source:	New York Times
Article:	California Needs Water and Clean Power. It Might Have a Fix for Both

Date:	June 21, 2026
Source;	ABC 7 News
Article:	California's water crisis driving higher interest in desalination as a new source

Policy:

Date: July 7, 2026
Source: Politico
Article: Newsom looks to lock in his water agenda

Date: June 29, 2026
Source: Office of Governor Newsom
Article: Governor appoints Thomas Gibson as Director of the Department of Water Resources

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June 24, 2026

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Via email to: David.Burruto@asm.ca.gov, Caitlin.Voorhees@asm.ca.gov, Frankie.Falzon@asm.ca.gov, Daniel.herzstein@asm.ca.gov, Abigail.RivamonteMesa@asm.ca.gov, Yasamin.salari@asm.ca.gov

Dear Assembly Members Papan, Stefani, and Haney,

I write to follow up on my letter of March 31. As promised, we have been diligently working on developing an alternative for the Millbrae Operations Center Improvements Project. At the end of March, we anticipated the new alternative analysis would take about three months, or until the end of June 2026.

We have not completed the cost analysis, but we have developed an alternative within the existing Millbrae Operations Center footprint that is comparable in terms of operational space to the 2025 alternative. The alternative does not impact on OSH operations, provides for accommodating the same occupancy as the 2025 alternative, and includes a new three-story lab/administration office building, a new single-story shops-building, and a new four-story parking structure.

The new alternative is currently undergoing project cost estimating by an independent consultant. We expect the cost estimate and final reviews to be complete by August 15. At that time, we will be ready to share the results with you and the other stakeholders in the Project prior to making any further decisions on the next steps.

// // //

If you have any questions in the meantime, feel free to reach out.

Sincerely,

Dennis J. Herrera
General Manager

cc:

Honorable Daniel Lurie, San Francisco Mayor
Tom Smegal, General Manager, Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency
Louis Vella, Chair, Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency Board of Directors
Joshua Arce, President, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission
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June 19, 2026

President Josh Arce and Commissioners
San Francisco Public Utilities Commission
commission@sfwater.org

Re: Item 8 (June 23, 2026): 2025 Urban Water Management Plan (UWMP) and Reservoir Storage.

Dear President Arce and Commissioners:

I was surprised while reviewing Appendix B of the UWMP (Summary of San Francisco's Response to 2012-2016 Drought Experience – pdf page 450) and Appendix C (Summary of San Francisco's Response to 2020-2023 Drought Experience – pdf page 462).

There is no mention of reservoir storage levels during those droughts.

As you know, storage is critical to SFPUC water supply. On pdf page 497 of the packet it states, "…the RWS depends on water supply that is stored prior to a drought; the storage in RWS reservoirs at the start of a drought is the main source of water supply that the SFPUC manages during a drought."

The severity of a drought should be measured by the low point in storage during the drought. **Ignoring storage is like having a bank statement with deposits and debits, but no account balance.**

For storage levels during the 2020-2023 drought, please see Attachment A.

The UWMP Itself Fails to Consider Reservoir Storage

Table 8-3 in the UWMP suggests that in 2050 the SFPUC would only be able to provide 68% of baseline water demand in Year 1 and 57% in Years 2 through 5 of a 5-year drought if the Bay Delta Water Quality Control Plan is implemented. What's hidden from this table is how the numbers were calculated.

Table 8-3. Regional Water System Supply Availability During Normal and Dry Years (Base Years 2030–2050) With Bay-Delta Plan Amendment

[Submittal Table 7-1 Retail: Bases of Water Year Data (Reliability Assessment)]

Base Year	Normal Year	Single Dry Year	Dry Year 1	Dry Year 2	Dry Year 3	Dry Year 4	Dry Year 5
2030	100%	75%	75%	63%	63%	63%	63%
2035	100%	74%	74%	63%	63%	63%	63%
2040	100%	72%	72%	61%	61%	61%	61%
2045	100%	70%	70%	59%	59%	59%	59%
2050	100%	68%	68%	57%	57%	57%	57%

Table 8-3 is based on the SFPUC's methodology for addressing the Drought Risk Assessment (DRA) required for UWMPs. The Department of Water Resources' UWMP Guidebook requires: "A detailed discussion of anticipated supply availability under a normal water year, single dry year, and droughts lasting at least five years, as well as more frequent and severe periods of drought, as described in the drought risk assessment."

The SFPUC explains its methodology for addressing the Five-Year Drought Risk Assessment as follows:

> "In each demand scenario for 2030 through 2050, the SFPUC estimated RWS deliveries using the standard SFPUC procedure, which includes adding increased levels of rationing as needed in dry years to balance the demands on the RWS with available water supply. The five consecutive dry-year sequence shown in the tables below represent **years 2 through 6 of the design drought**."

The rationing figures provided by the SFPUC are extremely misleading, because they don't provide sufficient context for water managers to determine whether extreme rationing is justified. **To be able to make an informed decision, one would need to know how much water remains in storage at the end of each year**.

Table YRA-1 on the following page puts things in greater perspective. It features the full eight years of the Design Drought and includes storage at the end of each year based on the rationing levels presented by the SFPUC.

Each of the following three tables addresses 2050 water supply projections with the Bay Delta Plan implemented. They do not include dead pool storage that is not easily accessible.

To put the storage figures in perspective, water demand in the SFPUC service area has been under 200 million gallons per day (mgd) for the past 11 years. 200 mgd equals 224 thousand acre-feet (TAF). Table YRA-1 uses the SFPUC's UWMP drought scenario. At the end of the driest consecutive five-year sequence, the SFPUC would still have more than 600 TAF in storage – enough water to last 2.5 years, not including water entitlements that would accrue during the following years. If the SFPUC were to adopt a more reasonable drought scenario, this water could be used to erase the extreme rationing projected in the UWMP.

Table YRA-1. 8-year Design Drought, with the Bay Delta Plan implemented, using SFPUC 2050 demand projections, and including storage.

Design Drought Fiscal Years

	86-87	87-88	88-89	89-90	90-91	91-92	92-76	76-77
Water available to RWS (mgd)	215.1	146.3	122.6	122.6	122.6	122.6	122.6	122.6
Mgd converted to 1,000 acre-feet (TAF)	241	164	137	137	137	137	137	137
Annual impact on storage (TAF)	-469	-263	+41	-206	-14	-159	-208	-192
Total SFPUC storage at end of year (TAF)	1,048	785	826	620	606	447	239	47

Source: Yosemite Rivers Alliance (using data provided by the SFPUC).

- "RWS" is "Regional Water System" (includes all SFPUC customers in San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda Counties).
- Table starts with SFPUC 2050 UWMP baseline demand of 215.1 mgd in 1986-87, and assumes 32% rationing in Year 2, and 43% rationing in Years 3-8 (per SFPUC figures). Mgd is converted to thousand acre-feet (TAF) per year in the second row.
- Storage at the beginning of the Design Drought is 1,517 TAF (per the SFPUC). This storage level is higher than the maximum appearing in other documents because the SFPUC's water bank at Don Pedro Reservoir is allowed to encroach into "flood storage" during the summer, but must be evacuated by October 1. This explains the high level of "Annual impact on storage" for 1986-87.
- "Annual impact on storage" includes SFPUC water entitlements, minus demand, minus other system losses (everything is accounted for).
- Fiscal Year 92-76 is where the two droughts that make up the Design Drought on blended. It includes the second half of 1992 and the first half of 1976.

I think we would all agree that the SFPUC has a much more reliable water supply than Valley Water, yet the five consecutive dry-year sequence Valley Water uses found that they would experience no rationing in Years 1 to 3 of the drought, and less than 10% rationing in Years 4 and 5 (see Attachment B).

Table YRA-2 on the following page shows what the five consecutive dry year sequence would look like if the SFPUC followed the letter of the UWMP Guidebook (like Valley Water) and just looked at the driest consecutive five-year sequence out of the six-year drought of record (1987-1992). You'll see that without any rationing, the SFPUC could manage the drought with the Bay Delta Plan implemented, and still have water remaining in storage. In fact, almost enough water in storage to last a sixth dry year.

Table YRA-2 – Regional Water System supply availability based on the six-year drought of record using the SFPUC's 2050 baseline demand projection of 215.1 mgd. Table assumes the Bay Delta Plan is implemented. Table does not incorporate any rationing.

	86-87	87-88	88-89	89-90	90-91	91-92
Projected 2050 RWS demand (mgd)	215.1	215.1	215.1	215.1	215.1	215.1
Demand converted to 1,000 acre-feet (TAF)	241	241	241	241	241	241
Annual impact on storage (TAF)	-469	-340	-63	-310	-118	-263
Total SFPUC storage at end of year (TAF)	1,048	708	645	335	217	-46

Source: Yosemite Rivers Alliance (using data provided by the SFPUC).

After the driest five-year sequence on record, the SFPUC would still have 217 TAF of water left in storage. Instead of showing 32% rationing in Year 1 and 43% rationing in Years 2 through 5, the UWMP would show that 100% of demand could be met in all five years, and this is without any rationing.

Table YRA-3 is similar to Table YRA-2, except it assumes 10% rationing in Years 3 and 4, and 20% rationing in Years 5 and 6. In this scenario the SFPUC could manage the driest consecutive six-year sequence, exceeding the UWMP requirement, and this is using the UWMP demand projections, which are considered the "outside envelope."

Table YRA-3 – SFPUC water supply based on the drought of record, using SFPUC 2050 UWMP demand projections, with the Bay Delta Plan in effect. 10% rationing in Years 3 and 4, and 20% rationing in Years 5 and 6.

	86-87	87-88	88-89	89-90	90-91	91-92
Water available to RWS (mgd)	215.1	215.1	193.6	193.6	172.1	172.1
Demand converted to 1,000 acre-feet (TAF)	241	241	217	217	193	193
Annual impact on storage (TAF)	-469	-340	-39	-286	-70	-215
Total SFPUC storage at end of year (TAF)	1,048	708	669	383	313	98

Source: Yosemite Rivers Alliance (using data provided by the SFPUC).

With such misleading calculations and conclusions in the UWMP, it's not hard to see whey the SFPUC ranks low in terms of being trusted.

You've run out of time to make substantive changes to the UWMP, but you still have time to ask questions and make recommendations that can help put the SFPUC on a path toward better environmental stewardship and reduced water rate increases.

Let's have a workshop on the Design Drought!

Sincerely,

Peter Drekmeier
Policy Director

Cc: BAWSCA
SFPUC Citizens' Advisory Commission

Attachment A

SFPUC Water Shortage Emergency Declaration (2021)

Summary

November 2021: Following two dry years, the SFPUC declared a Water Shortage Emergency and called for systemwide water use reductions. At the time of the declaration, the SFPUC had more than a million acre-feet of water in storage (see below) – enough to last 4.5 years.

April 2022: The SFPUC imposed a 5% drought surcharge on San Francisco retail customers to make up for lost sales. Wholesale customers enacted their own measures.

Early December 2022: SFPUC storage was at a drought low-point of 932 thousand acre-feet – still enough water to last 4 years.

January 2023: After extremely heavy precipitation in December and January, it was clear the SFPUC would achieve full storage. On January 17, storage was at 1.35 million acre-feet.

May 2023: The SFPUC finally lifted the drought surcharge, but not before it was built into their FY 2023-24 budget. That budget experienced a $25 million shortfall in retail (San Francisco) water sales and a $5 million shortfall in wholesale (BAWSCA) sales.

December 6, 2021 Reservoir Storage

Reservoir	Current Storage[1,2,3] (AF)	Maximum Storage[4] (AF)	Available Capacity (AF)	Percent of Maximum Storage	Normal Percent of Maximum Storage[5]
Tuolumne System					
Hetch Hetchy	263,600	340,830	77,230	77.3%	**71.8%**
Cherry	241,900	268,800	26,900	90.0%	-
Eleanor	16,450	21,495	5,045	76.5%	-
Water Bank	337,192	570,000	232,808	59.2%	**98.5%**
Total Tuolumne Storage	**859,142**	**1,201,125**	**341,983**	**71.5%**	-
Local System					
Calaveras	54,905	96,670	41,765	56.8%	-
San Antonio	48,525	53,266	4,741	91.1%	-
Crystal Springs	52,973	58,309	5,336	90.8%	-
San Andreas	15,960	19,027	3,067	83.9%	-
Pilarcitos	2,159	3,030	871	71.3%	-
Total Local Storage	**174,522**	**230,302**	**55,780**	**75.8%**	-
Total System Storage	1,033,664	1,431,427	397,763	**72.2%**	**80.2%**
Total without water bank	696,472	861,427	164,955	**80.9%**	-

Source: SFPUC Drought Conditions Update, December 6, 2021.

SFPUC storage hit its lowest point of the drought in early December 2022, but there was still enough water to last four years.

December 5, 2022 Reservoir Storage

Reservoir	Current Storage[1,2,3] (AF)	Maximum Storage[4] (AF)	Available Capacity (AF)	Percent of Maximum Storage	Normal Percent of Maximum Storage[5]
Tuolumne System					
Hetch Hetchy	244,900	360,360	115,460	68.0%	**68.0%**
Cherry	244,700	273,345	28,645	89.5%	-
Eleanor	18,400	27,100	8,700	67.9%	-
Water Bank	253,147	570,000	316,853	44.4%	**98.5%**
Total Tuolumne Storage	**761,147**	**1,230,805**	**469,658**	**61.8%**	-
Local System					
Calaveras	56,932	96,670	39,738	58.9%	-
San Antonio	44,456	53,266	8,810	83.5%	-
Crystal Springs	51,735	58,309	6,574	88.7%	-
San Andreas	16,164	19,027	2,863	85.0%	-
Pilarcitos	2,153	3,030	877	71.1%	-
Total Local Storage	**171,440**	**230,302**	**58,862**	**74.4%**	-
Total System Storage	932,587	1,461,107	528,520	**63.8%**	**78.6%**
Total without water bank	679,440	891,107	211,667	**76.2%**	-

Source: SFPUC Drought Conditions Update, December 5, 2022.

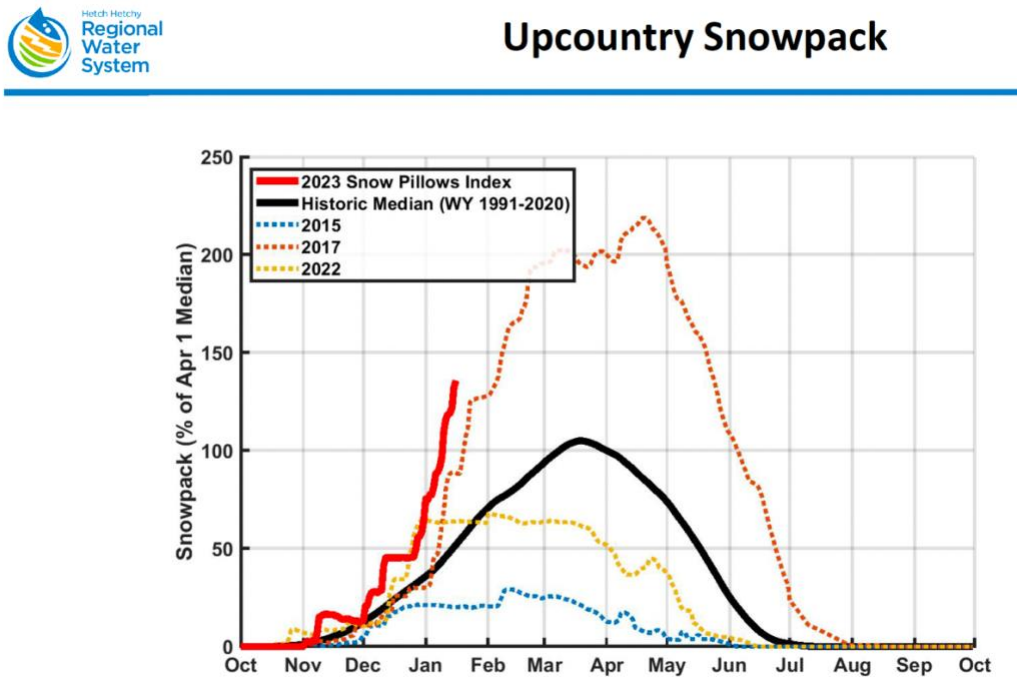
By mid-January 2023, SFPUC storage had already reached 92% of capacity and snowpack accumulation was on a record-setting pace. The drought was clearly over.

Current Reservoir Storage as of January 17, 2023

Reservoir	Current Storage[1,2,3] (AF)	Maximum Storage[4] (AF)	Available Capacity (AF)	Percent of Maximum Storage	Normal Percent of Maximum Storage[5]
Tuolumne System					
Hetch Hetchy	291,100	360,360	69,260	80.8%	**67.9%**
Cherry	228,229	273,345	45,116	83.5%	-
Eleanor	22,580	27,100	4,520	83.3%	-
Water Bank	570,000	570,000	0	100.0%	**98.6%**
Total Tuolumne Storage	**1,111,909**	**1,230,805**	**118,896**	**90.3%**	-
Local System					
Calaveras	96,741	96,670	0	100.0%	-
San Antonio	54,412	53,266	0	100.0%	-
Crystal Springs	65,834	68,953	3,119	95.5%	-
San Andreas	17,769	19,027	1,258	93.4%	-
Pilarcitos	3,139	3,030	0	100.0%	-
Total Local Storage	**237,895**	**240,946**	**4,377**	**98.7%**	-
Total System Storage	1,349,804	1,471,751	123,273	**91.7%**	**80.3%**
Total without water bank	779,804	901,751	123,273	**86.5%**	-

Source: SFPUC Drought Conditions Update, January 17, 2023.

Snowpack can be considered "water in the bank," and it was clear there would be a tremendous amount of runoff in the spring to top off all the reservoirs with lots of water to spill.



Source: SFPUC Drought Conditions Update, January 17, 2023

The SFPUC Water Enterprise was headed toward a large budget deficit in FY 2023-24 – it ended up being $25 million in lost retail (San Francisco) revenues and $5 million in lost wholesale (BAWSCA) revenues.

Here's how it was explained:

> *"Water and Wastewater:* revenues are projected to be below budget. The budget was adopted assuming the drought surcharge would remain. It was removed May of 2023. Additionally, the wholesale water volumes are lower than expected."[1]

Why did the SFPUC wait until May to lift the drought surcharge, and why did they assume it would remain in place for another year despite the extremely wet beginning to 2023?

How did the Water Shortage Emergency and call for water conservation impact finances and water rates?

Was it prudent for the SFPUC to declare a Water Shortage Emergency when they had 4.5 year's-worth of water in storage? The Design Drought suggests it was.

[1] SFPUC FY 2023-24 1st Quarter Budget Report, December 12, 2023 – https://sfpuc.sharefile.com/share/view/se1f88d7d5b3a41829939713649bc1802

In FY 2023-24, the SFPUC experienced a $25 million shortfall in retail (San Francisco) water sales and a $5 million shortfall in wholesale (BAWSCA) sales.

FY 2023-24 Water Budgetary Variances

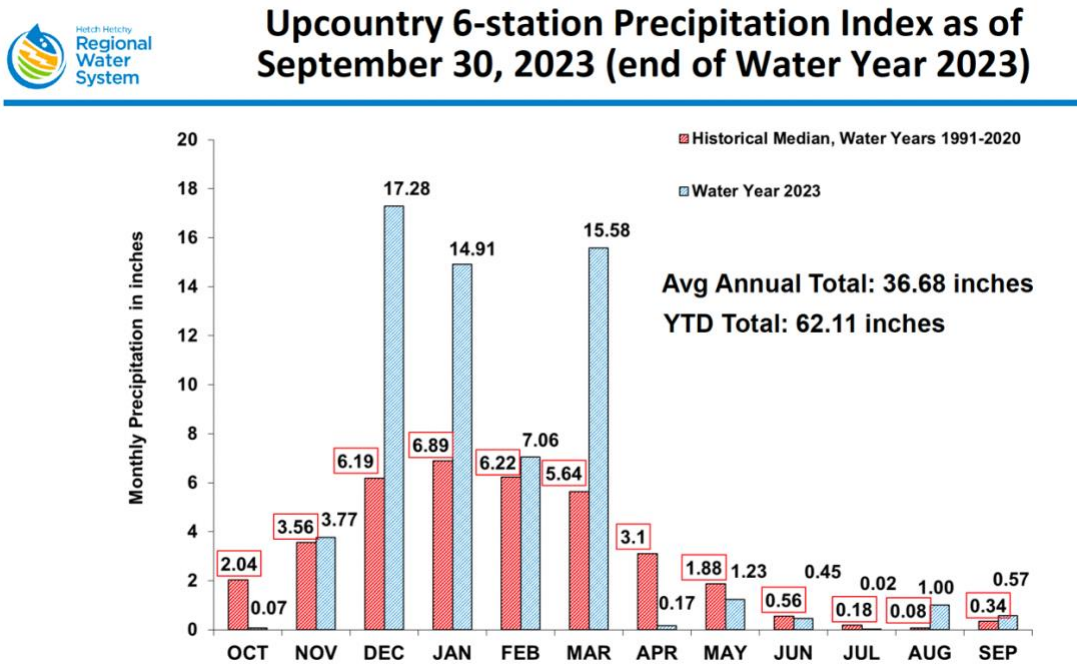
- **Net operating result: ($3.6M)**
- Total sources down ($24.4M), and $20.8M in cost savings
- Programmatic Savings & Legal Settlements ($8.4M)
- *Net impact on fund balance: ($12.0M)*

Sources

- ($25.0M) or -7.2% retail revenues
- ($5.2M) or -1.6% wholesale revenues
- $5.9M or 11.1% non-operating revenues

Source: SFPUC FY 2023-24 4th Quarter Budget Report, September 24, 2024 – https://sfpuc.sharefile.com/share/view/s297e2428d54946e5a39c984791d83b82

Based on the following graph, was it reasonable for the SFPUC to wait until May to lift the drought surcharge?



Source: SFPUC Water Supply Conditions Update, October 2, 2023.

The SFPUC ended the 2023 water year entitled to enough water (2.77 million acre-feet) to refill all of its reservoirs almost twice.

Valley Water's 5 Consecutive Dry-Year Sequence

7.3.3 Five Dry Year Service Reliability

The greatest challenge to Valley Water's water supply reliability is multiple dry years, such as those that occurred in 1988 through 1992 and in 2012 through 2016. The five dry-year period used in this analysis is 1988 to 1992, which was an extended and more severe drought within historic record and WEAP modeling period. Estimated supplies and demands for the period, under different demand years, are shown in Table 7-4. The analysis indicates that with existing and planned projects' supplies, Valley Water's diverse water supplies are sufficient to meet demands throughout the full five-year drought in demand years 2035 and 2040 without having to call for short-term water use reductions, but in demand years 2030 as well as 2045 through 2050, there will be shortages in the last two years of the drought. The shortages are less than 10% of projected demands, thus within Valley Water's level of service goal of meeting 100% of annual water demand during non-drought years and at least 80% of annual water demand in drought years. Those shortages will be addressed through a combination of supply augmentation from transfer and exchange and water use reductions.

Table 7-4. Multiple Dry Years Supplies and Demands (AF)

		2030	2035	2040	2045	2050
First Year	Supply	232,000	242,000	243,000	225,000	223,000
	Supply from Storage	175,000	245,000	239,000	242,000	242,000
	Demand Totals	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000
	Surplus/(Shortfall)	77,000	157,000	152,000	137,000	135,000
Second Year	Supply	322,000	287,000	287,000	267,000	268,000
	Supply from Storage	136,000	212,000	196,000	188,000	186,000
	Demand Totals	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000
	Surplus/(Shortfall)	128,000	169,000	153,000	125,000	124,000
Third Year	Supply	262,000	231,000	232,000	203,000	204,000
	Supply from Storage	121,000	186,000	174,000	160,000	159,000
	Demand Totals	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000
	Surplus/(Shortfall)	53,000	87,000	76,000	33,000	33,000
Fourth Year	Supply	266,000	241,000	240,000	241,000	241,000
	Supply from Storage	35,000	121,000	106,000	63,000	63,000
	Demand Totals	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000
	Surplus/(Shortfall)	(29,000)	32,000	16,000	(26,000)	(26,000)
	WSCP - supply augmentation benefit	15,000			10,000	10,000
	WSCP - use reduction savings benefit	14,000			16,000	16,000
	Revised Surplus/(Shortfall)	0			0	0
	Supply	277,000	304,000	309,000	282,000	282,000

		2030	2035	2040	2045	2050
Fifth Year	Supply from Storage	32,000	54,000	30,000	30,000	30,000
	Demand Totals	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000	330,000
	Surplus/(Shortfall)	(21,000)	28,000	9,000	(18,000)	(18,000)
	WSCP - supply augmentation benefit	15,000			10,000	10,000
	WSCP - use reduction savings benefit	6,000			8,000	8,000
	Revised Surplus/(Shortfall)	0			0	0

All values are rounded to the nearest 1,000 AF. Supplies reflect consecutive dry-year conditions based on the 1988–1992 hydrologic sequence and include the use of stored water reserves. Stored supplies are managed to avoid groundwater levels that could cause subsidence, protect water reserved for habitat releases and emergency use, and reflect practical and contractual limits on withdrawals. WSCP benefits include both supply augmentation and demand reduction measures implemented during later drought years to mitigate projected shortfalls.

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Wet Season's end for Water Year 2026

California Water Blog | July 5, 2026 | Jay Lund

California's Water Year runs from October 1 of the previous calendar year through September 30. California's "wet" season is traditionally October 1 – April 1. The rest of the year (and often parts of the "wet" season) is usually dry. We can get major storms into April, but often not.

So nearly all this Water Year's precipitation has fallen already.

Precipitation

Statewide precipitation this wet season has once again been unusually average overall (97%), with unusual uniformity across this large state, so the map below (Figure 1) is much less colorful than last year, with similar statewide precipitation. There were also fewer major wildfires and unusually low snow accumulations compared to last year!

This year's "whiplash" was within the "wet" season, as seen in Figure 2. If you have enough wet and dry periods within the wet season, the season turns out about average overall.

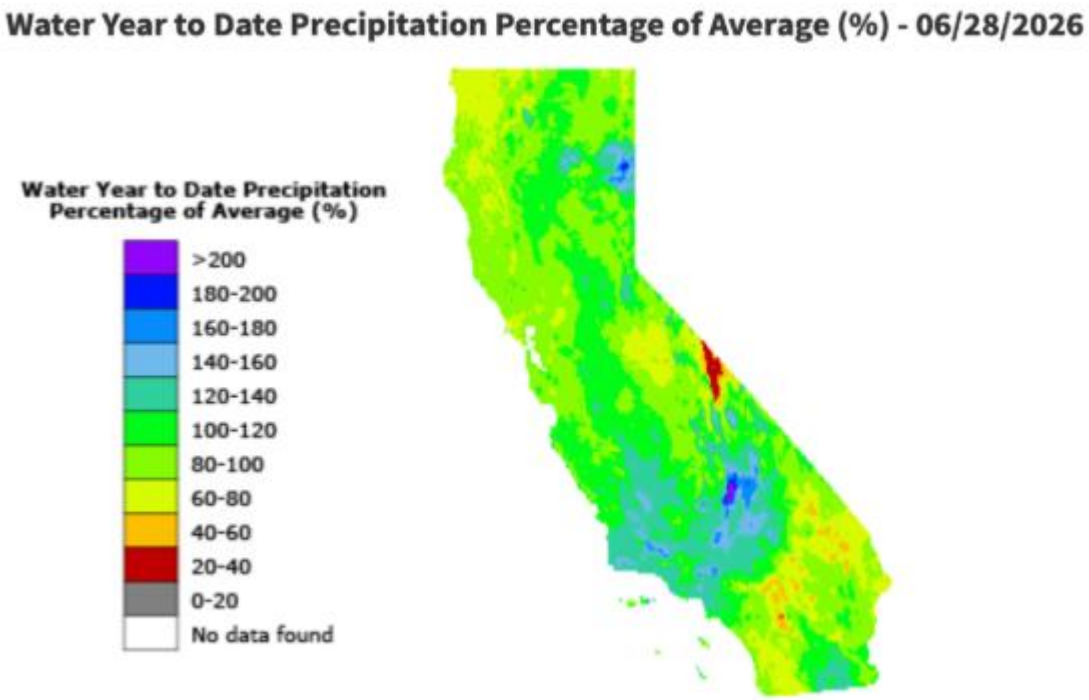


Figure 1. Statewide precipitation by May 28, 2026, a little past the nominal end of California's wet season. Source: https://cww.water.ca.gov

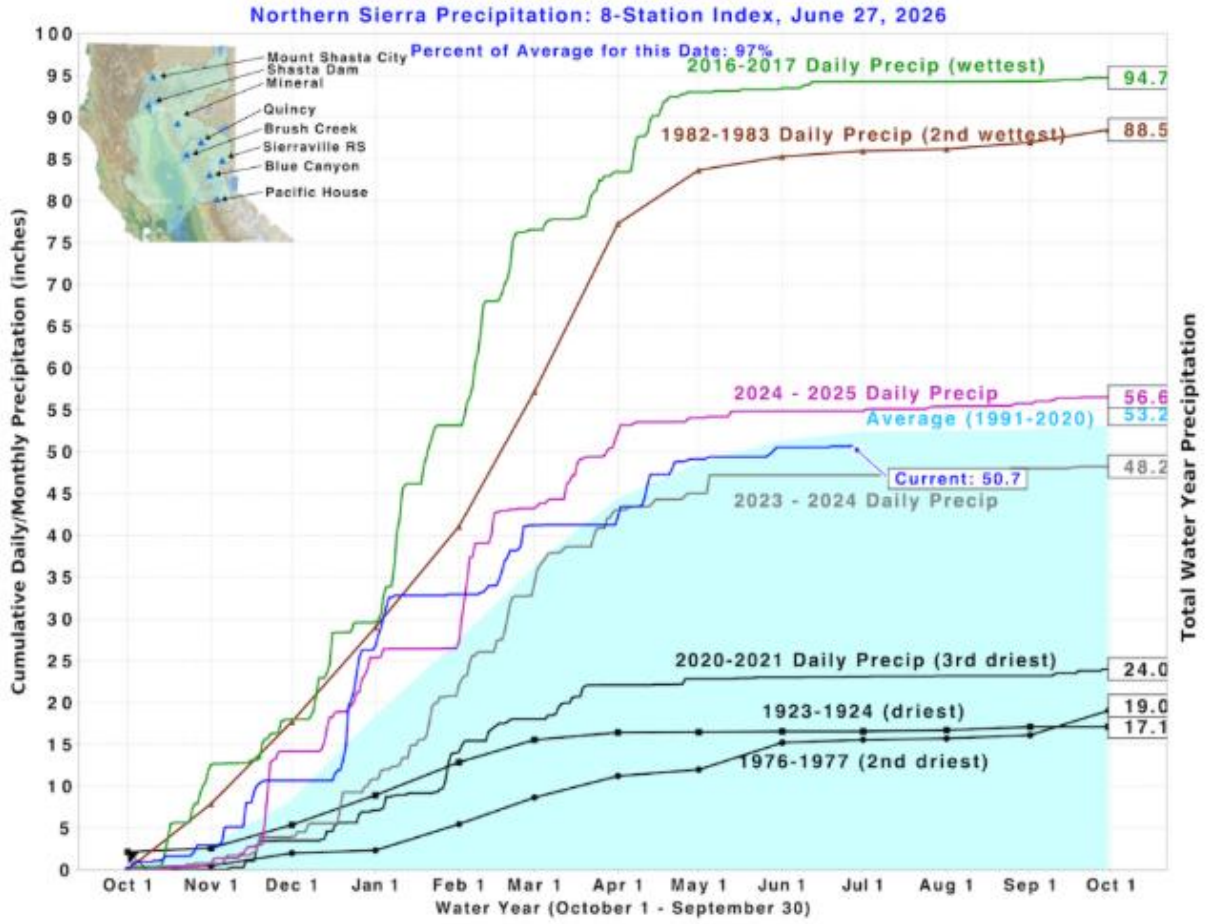


Figure 2. The wet beginning, dry period, very wet period, and long dry and moderate wet periods of California's 2026 "wet" season. Source: https://cdec.water.ca.gov/reportapp/javareports?name=PLOT_ESI.pdf

Snowpack

Snowpack was unusually low in 2026, but less bad than lows during the 2012-2016 drought.

The figure below shows we can have a wide range of snow accumulations and melting patterns. These are changing with a warming climate. This year also had large amounts of early snow-melt in an unusually warm and dry March within the "wet" season.

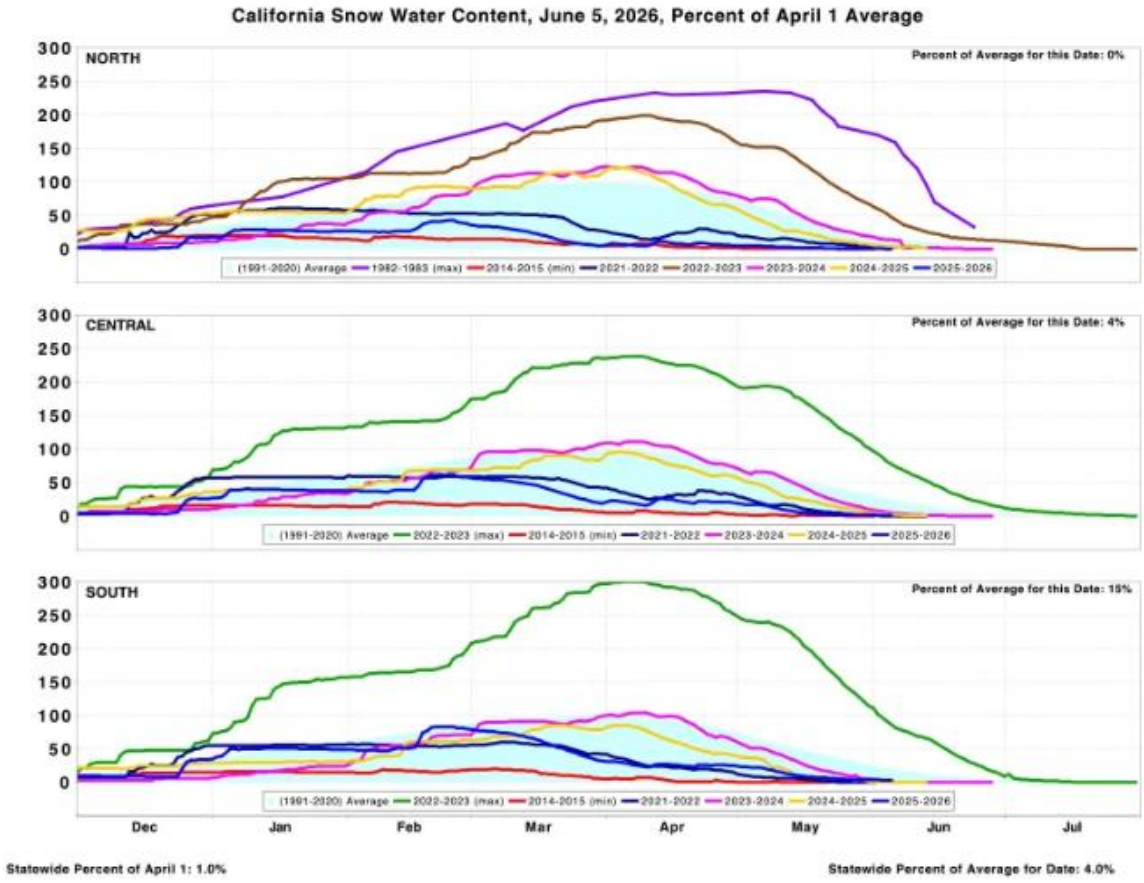


Figure 3. 2026 California Snowpack – very low. Source: https://cdec.water.ca.gov/reportapp/javareports?name=PLOT_SWC.pdf

Reservoir Storage

For water stored instate for California, storage levels are about the same as last year and are pretty good. Because the last three years have not been dry, California retains an unusually large amount of water in its reservoirs. Most surface water storage within California is in the Sacramento and San Joaquin basins, and these basins are well connected to California's statewide water conveyance projects.

But Colorado River reservoirs continue 43 years of depletion since 1983, when they filled for the first and perhaps last time. Their overdrafting was 2.4 million-acre-ft this last year.

Table 1. California reservoir storage on May 28, 2026.
Source: https://cdec.water.ca.gov/reportapp/javareports?name=STORAGE

Area	Total Capacity 1000 AF	Historical Average 1000 AF	2025 1000 AF	2026 1000 AF	% Average
Intrastate					
North Coast	3,096	2,346	2,689	2,683	114
San Francisco Bay	710	529	495	453	86
Central Coast	982	643	694	702	109
South Coast	2,106	1,454	1,429	1414	97
Sacramento	16,038	12,919	14,922	14,795	115
San Joaquin	11,483	7,877	9,343	9,638	122
Tulare Lake	2,087	1,063	1,401	1,620	152
North Lahontan	1,073	541	884	957	177
South Lahontan	412	261	310	340	130
Subtotal	37,989	27,632	32,167	32,603	118
Interstate					
North Coast	1,137	718	846	693	96
Colorado River (1)	52,939	32,500	18,479	16,072	49
Subtotal	54,076	33,218	19,325	16,765	50
Total	92,065	60,850	51,492	49,368	81
1 – includes lakes Mead and Powell					

Groundwater

Availability of systematic groundwater data for California is still maturing for statewide and regional assessments but is improving.

Over the last 20 years, of several thousand wells monitored semi-annually, few had increasing groundwater levels, and more had decreased levels than no change. Areas with the greatest overdraft are concentrated in the southern Central Valley's Tulare Basin. This pattern of overdraft is about a century old.

Some good news is that the last 10 years have seen more wells improving than deteriorating. (Curiously, the total number of wells in the sample also seems to have decreased.) We might be starting to see a net-positive trend with groundwater after more than a century of large net-negative trends in groundwater overdraft, albeit still with a large annual net-overdraft rate.

Groundwater storage capacities of aquifers are huge (statewide more than 10 times California's surface water storage capacity). Also, local annual groundwater use is subject to very large fluctuations with local, regional, and statewide hydrologic and regulatory conditions. So year-by-year changes in statewide storage seem rather unstable and unreliable as indicators of long-term groundwater conditions.

As we move closer to 2040, the state will need a reasoned approach for considering how much of non-compliance is hydrologic luck as opposed to inadequate management (Escriva-Bou et al. 2020).

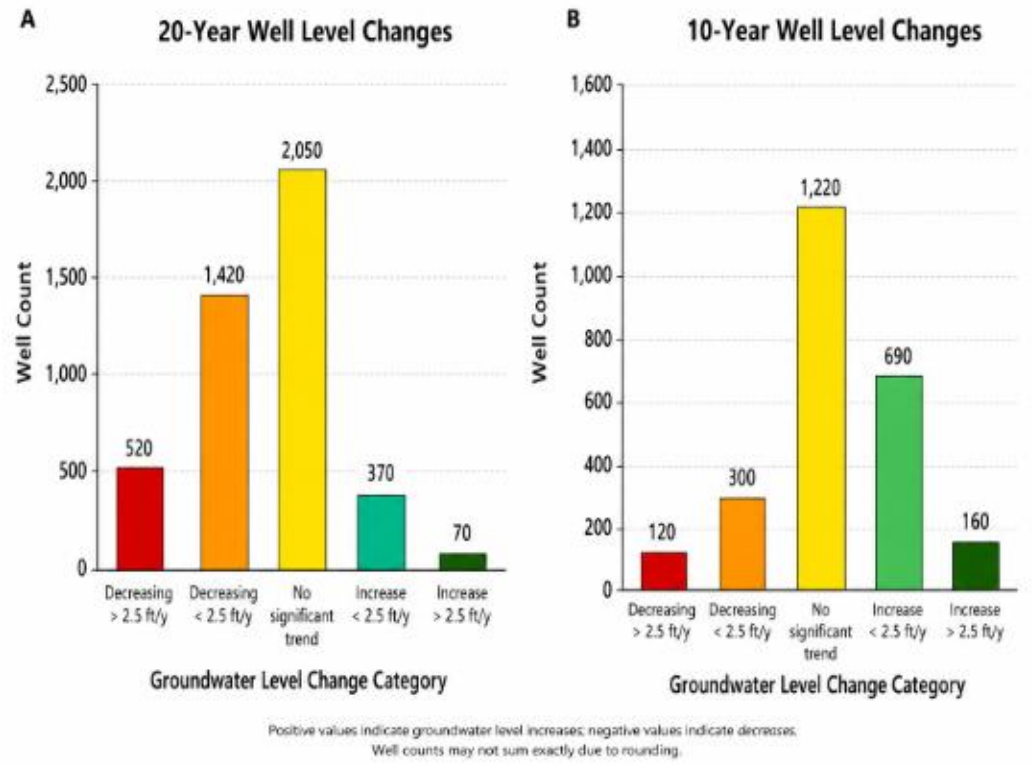


Figure 4. Central Valley groundwater trends, number of monitored wells changing over 20 years (A) and 10-years (B) until 2026. Source: https://sgma.water.ca.gov/CalGWLive/#groundwater redrawn using ChatGPT)

SWP and CVP Water Deliveries

State Water Project (SWP) allocations are now 45% for this year (the 30-year average allocation is 60%). The Central Valley Project allocations are 100% for the most senior water contractors (Settlement and Exchange contractors) and for Friant contractors' Class 1 water, 75% of historical use for urban contractors, and 25% for other south-of-Delta contractors (12-year average is 30%). There is a possibility that some allocations might increase further. So it is a good year for urban and senior agricultural water contractors, and a better than average, but still disappointing, year for more junior agricultural water project contractors.

Biological Water Year Data

As we intensely struggle with slow progress in improving water operations for ecological purposes, we will need more organized and real-time information on biological conditions. We collect considerable data on salmon returns and juveniles statewide, Delta smelt (alas, mostly zeros), and other fishes, as well as various waterbirds. But these data are not yet organized for policy, water management, or public discourse. They remain fragmented and tend to be mostly available annually, with significant lag. There are some efforts to improve this situation, such as https://www.cbr.washington.edu/sacramento/ .

We need better organized and available real time data to support broader and more integrated discussions and assessments of ecosystem policy and water management. Otherwise California's struggles will be longer, more expensive, more controversial, and less productive.

(As is often the case, the organization of data on a problem reflects the organization and effectiveness of our institutions. This is borne out by recent improvements in groundwater data.)

Overall

California's 2026 water year has had a good "wet" season overall. Neither floods nor droughts overall.Even in statistically average years, California water will usually be weird in places and at times.

As we work to improve water management, we need to improve our data management, and water accounting. The pace of innovation is often limited by our ability to organize effective data development.

# # #

About the Author
Jay Lund is an Emeritus Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the University of California – Davis, and Vice Director at the Center for Watershed Sciences.

Fire and ice: ‘Snow drought’ could impact water, wildfire

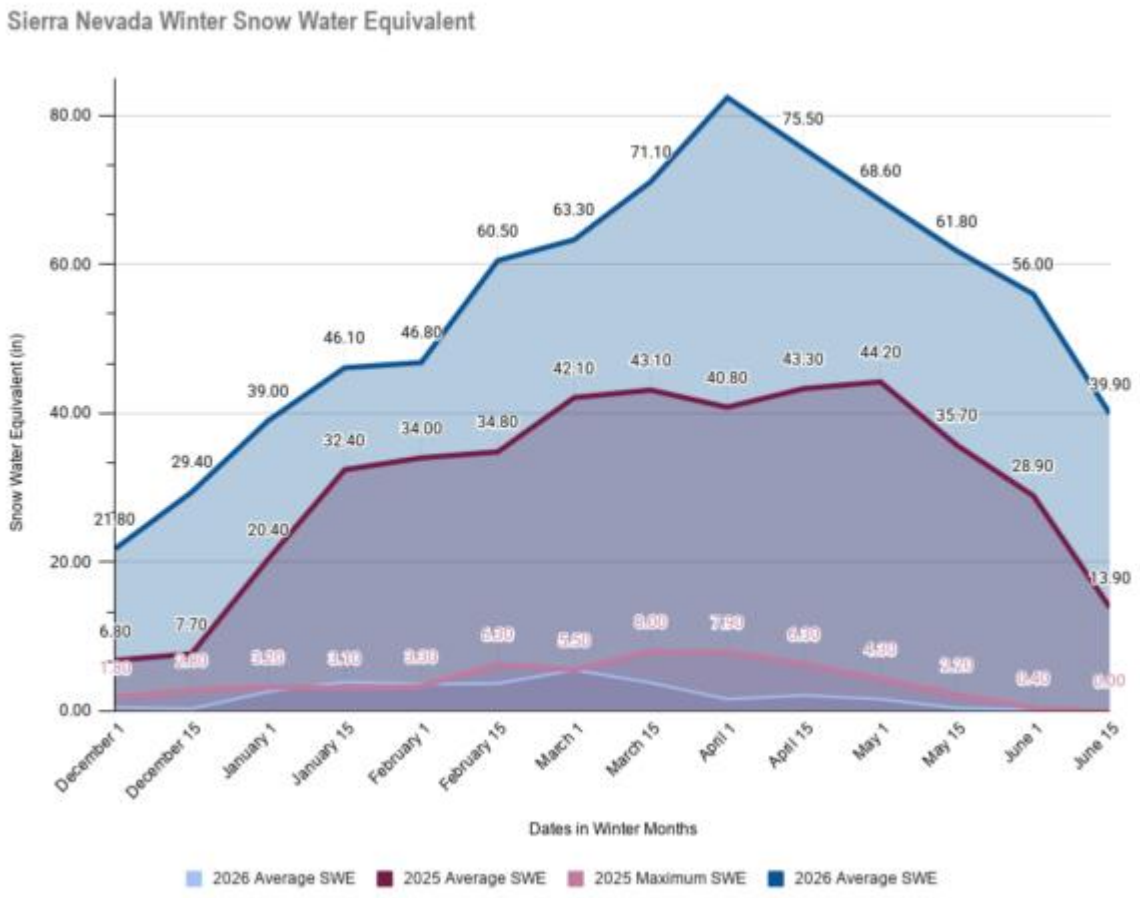
The Plumas Sun | June 23, 2026 | Lalini Pedris

Patches of late spring snow remain near Spanish Peak. Photo by Lindsay Morton

In January, the U.S. Drought Monitor declared California drought-free for the first time in 25 years. The state has received 97% of average precipitation since the water year began Oct. 1 2025. So why is everyone so concerned about water?

It comes down to snowpack. The University of California, Berkeley’s Central Sierra Snow Laboratory recorded a cumulative 294 inches of snow for the winter season, about 40 inches below average and 87% of the annual median. The problem is, it didn’t stick around.

The West saw its warmest winter on record, according to NOAA’s National Centers for Environmental Information, causing the Sierra snowpack to melt fast and early — a phenomenon known as a snow drought. Snow melt recorded March 1 had reached levels usually expected by May, according to California’s Department of Water Resources. By April 1, snowpack across the state was just 18 percent of average, data showed. The National Integrated Drought Information System called this winter’s snowpack the second lowest on record for California since 1981.



Graph provided by National Oceanic and Atmospherics Administration.

In a typical year, a gradual release of snowmelt water fills creeks and reservoirs, and helps to sustain vegetation through the relatively dry summer months. The lack of that reserve has the potential to impact both water supply and wildfire risk.

Water supply ‘decent’

Every year, as winter turns to spring, water managers with California’s DWR work to optimize reservoir water supply to ensure that municipal and agricultural users have enough for the dry season.They manage releases, aiming to create enough space in the reservoirs to capture snowmelt, rain and storm floodwaters.

Fill the reservoirs too early, melting snow and storm runoff could overburden them and cause overflow, flooding downstream and wasting precious water. Wait too late, and there may not be enough to last through the dry season for residents, power hydroelectric plants and irrigation.

With the DWR’s peak snowmelt report for the 2025-2026 season likely reached by February 24 instead of the more typical May or June, the opportunity to fill reservoirs has mostly passed, department officials said.

“Later snow hangs around and melts off slowly <and> fills the reservoir at a more ideal time,” said Andy Reising, manager of DWR’s Snow Surveys and Water Supply Forecasting Unit.

At the moment, water reservoirs are in “decent shape,” he said, but each reservoir is different and has different requirements. According to the CNRFC Monthly Reservoir Storage Summary, as of May 31 reservoir levels ranged from 68% percent of capacity at Mountain Meadows to 98% at Antelope Lake. A majority are above typical levels for the time of year.

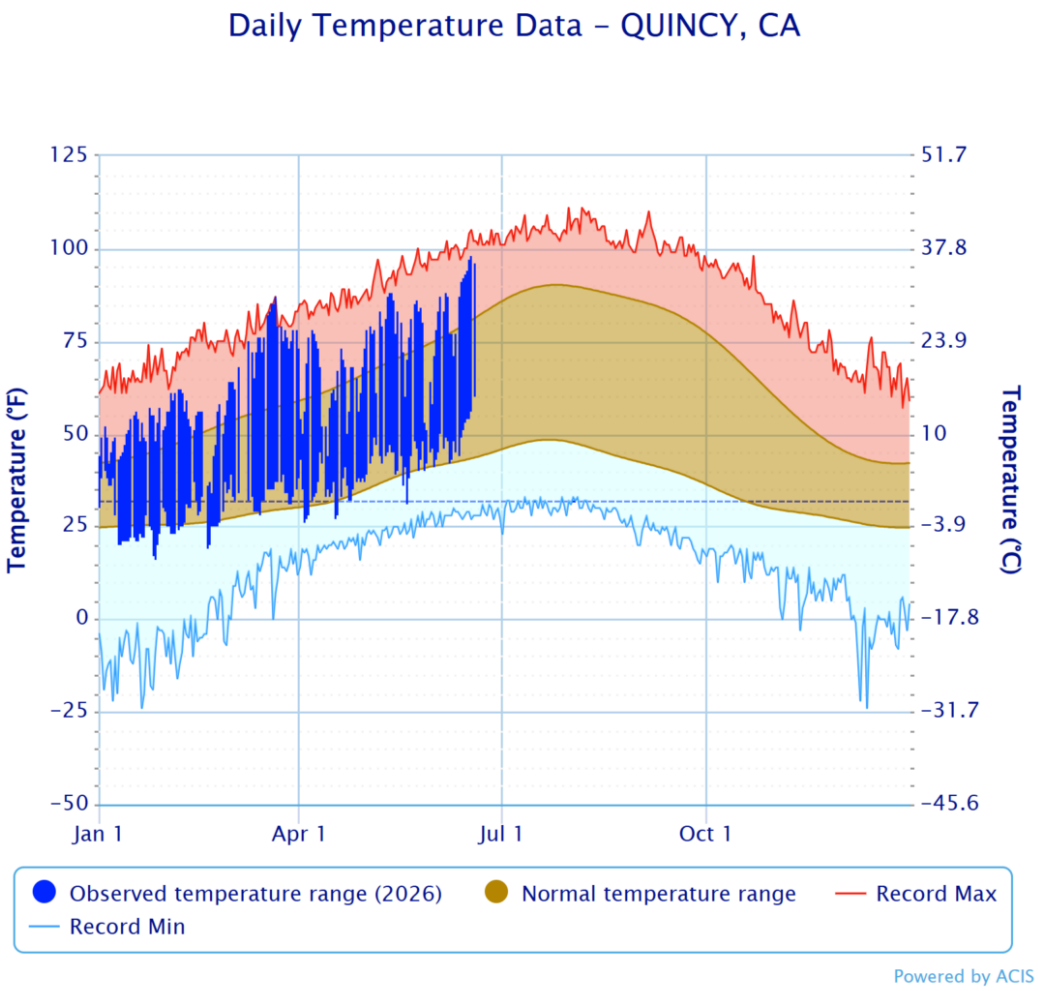
Location	Total capacity (KAF)	30 year hist avg (KAF)	May 2025 (KAF)	May 2026 (KAF)	2026 % capacity	2026 % avg
Lake Almanor	1,143.00	972.39	1,082.00	1,075.35	94%	111%
Mountain Meadows	23.9	17.35	16.79	16.23	68%	94%
Butt Valley Reservoir	49.9	39.93	43.48	43.09	86%	108%
Bucks Lake	105.6	91.38	101.54	95.09	90%	104%
Antelope Lake	22.57	22.05	22.82	22.22	98%	101%
Frenchman Lake	55.48	41.05	55.44	54	97%	132%
Lake Davis	84.4	64.48	79.62	81.54	97%	126%
Little Grass Valley Reservoir	94.7	83.32	81.15	85.86	91%	103%
Sly Creek Reservoir	65.7	59.63	53.29	48.45	74%	81%
Lake Oroville	3,424.75	2,921.36	3,415.45	3,331.62	97%	114%

Information courtesy CNRFC Monthly Reservoir Storage Summary

Across the Feather River watershed, the agency expects snow lines to rise above 7,000 feet as the climate warms, Reising said. In the Plumas County area, that rules out most of the high country, with the exception of Lassen Peak.

Without the typical reserve of slowly-melting snow, the landscape dries out earlier. That’s especially true when temperatures are high. According to NOAA, the average temperature for May in Quincy was 59.4°F the third highest since 2000 and about 4.7 degrees higher than the 30-year average of 54.7°F.

That pattern has sparked concern about fire danger for many in Plumas County.



Quincy weather for 2026 to date, as compared with average and record temperatures. Courtesy National Oceanic and Atmospherics Administration.

Wildfire risk difficult to predict

Snow drought is just one of many factors influencing fire risk, said Daniel Swain, a climate scientist and associate researcher with University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources. The same set of circumstances can impact landscapes in different ways. Each ecosystem has an established wildfire regime. That is the pattern of wildfire frequency and intensity plant and animal life have adapted to work within. Major changes can reshape those patterns, he said.

Plumas County has experienced such a wide-scale ecosystem transformation in recent burn areas that it has created a different fire regime … simply because there's different vegetation growing," Swain said.

In California, he said, there are two broad categories of fire regime: moisture-limited environments such as mature Ponderosa pine forests and fuel-limited environments such as grasslands.

In moisture-limited environments where there are a lot of trees, drier weather makes the trees more flammable. In fuel-limited environments like grass- and shrubland, wetter conditions spur growth,

generating more fuel. Wetter conditions often precede wildfires in fuel-limited environments, Swain said.

In Plumas, Lassen and Butte counties “what was once primarily moisture-limited forest has, at least for the time being, largely transitioned to being fuel-limited grass and brush,” said Swain. The type of fuel also impacts fire behavior. Forests tend to burn with high intensity while grass- and shrubland are usually lower in intensity. Grassland fire often moves faster, he said.

Major ecosystem shifts make predicting fire risk more complex, particularly when combined with a patchwork of different types of vegetation where burn scar and established forest meet, Swain said.

The season ahead

By early June, Joe Walton was concerned. An assistant chief with California’s Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Lassen – Modoc Unit, he said the unit had already seen two small fires in the first two days of the month.

Fuel, weather and topography are the most influential factors determining fire behavior, according to Walton. If those things align, “it’s usually a bad mixture for a bad fire.”

> *“We’re nowhere near peak seasonal dryness.”*
> Joe Walton, California’s Department of Forestry and Fire Protection assistant chief

As vegetation dries out and “fuels cure” earlier in the season, fire potential can increase sooner than normal, especially combined with periods of hot, dry, windy weather, he said.

“A lot of folks kind of assume, when it’s hot, dry and windy, the risk is the same on any equivalently hot, dry windy day,” said Swain. But that’s not true. As time passes and fuel dries out, danger rises. “We’re nowhere near peak seasonal dryness,” he said.

The poor winter snowpack may contribute to fire risk in another way, said snow scientist Gabe Lewis with the Central Sierra Snow Lab. “You have a lot of people who weren’t really able to recreate over the winter,” he said. ‘A lot of those folks want to get out into our national forests and our national parks.”

On top of hot dry weather and an increase in outdoor activities is a “triple whammy:” Thousands of federal jobs have been eliminated, leaving fewer workers to enforce campfire regulations, and “making sure your chains on your trailer are hooked up,” Lewis said.

Still, the “historic low snowpack” this year doesn’t automatically mean it’s going to be the worst fire season ever, Walton said. “Hopefully it’s not.”

# # #

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[California Begins a New Era of Water Planning]
Northern California Water | June 18, 2026 | California Municipal Utilities Association

Photo: Xavier Mascareñas / California Department of Water Resources.

For decades, California's water planning efforts largely focused on managing scarcity. Senate Bill 72 marked a significant shift toward a different approach: building long-term water resilience through measurable supply targets, improved planning, and greater statewide coordination.

That shift began several years ago when a group of local water agency leaders came together to discuss how California could better prepare for a future defined by climate volatility, aging infrastructure, and increasingly unreliable water supplies. Those conversations ultimately helped launch the California Water for All coalition and a broader statewide movement to modernize California's approach to water planning.

One idea quickly rose to the forefront: California needed clear, long-term water supply targets embedded into the state's official planning process to ensure durability across leadership changes.

Recognizing that legislative action would be required, the California Municipal Utilities Association (CMUA), California State Association of Counties (CSAC), and California Council for Environmental and Economic Balance (CCEEB) co-sponsored Senate Bill 72, authored by Senator Anna Caballero (D-Merced). Signed into law in 2025, the legislation established

California's first-ever statewide water supply target: identifying 9 million acre-feet of additional water supply by 2040 to help offset projected climate-driven losses.

The legislation also modernized the California Water Plan process by emphasizing better data, measurable benchmarks, accountability, and stronger alignment between state, regional, and local planning efforts. Approximately 200 local water agencies, business organizations, agricultural leaders, labor groups, and other stakeholders ultimately came together in support of the bill.

Now, as implementation begins through the 2028 California Water Plan Update, there are encouraging signs that California is approaching this work with renewed collaboration and shared purpose.

The Department of Water Resources (DWR) has launched a new public engagement process, established a comprehensive website, formed an advisory committee representing diverse statewide interests, and emphasized transparency throughout the planning effort. DWR leadership has repeatedly stressed the importance of collaboration, communication, and broad participation as the process moves forward.

Photo: California Department of Water Resources – The California Aqueduct bifurcates in the West Branch and East Branch in the Tehachapi Afterbay

At the committee's inaugural meeting in Sacramento this May, DWR Director Karla Nemeth reinforced the urgency of the moment, noting:

“California’s hydrology is changing. We’re living that now. Extreme wet swings to intensely dry within the same season. The work of crafting the next California Water Plan will help us plan smarter to deal with the way climate change is testing our water systems.”

Western Municipal Water District General Manager and CMUA Board President Craig Miller, one of 36 advisory committee members and an early convener of the California Water for All coalition, said the meeting demonstrated that California has both the expertise and leadership necessary to meet these challenges — but success will require new ways of working together across regions, interests, and traditional divides.

DWR’s Deputy Director, Joel Metzger, said, “The new California Water Plan is where vision meets accountability. We’ll set measurable targets, improve our data, and align planning efforts in ways that deliver real results on the ground.”

That collaborative mindset may ultimately be one of the most important outcomes of SB 72.

The road ahead will not be easy. The planning process will continue through 2027 and will undoubtedly involve difficult discussions, competing priorities, and complex policy decisions. But there is growing momentum around a more proactive, actionable, and forward-looking approach to statewide water management.

Equally important, California’s water leaders appear to be embracing a broader shift in mindset: moving beyond managing shortages toward building long-term water resilience and abundance for communities, agriculture, businesses, and the environment alike.

That spirit of optimism, accountability, and collaboration was foundational to Senate Bill 72. Encouragingly, those principles are already shaping the next chapter of California water planning.

# # #

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Palo Alto officials say San Francisco's PUC is hoarding water
Daily Post | June 18, 2026 | Braden Carrtwright

The Michael M. O'Shaughnessy Dam, part of the Hetch Hetchy Water System. Photo credit: SFPUC

Palo Alto officials say the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is hoarding water based on unrealistic drought projections, driving up rates and killing salmon.

"This is a very serious problem. Very serious," Councilman Ed Lauing said last Monday. "If it's not stopped, this could cause severe rate hikes in water, and that is not what this council wants."

Utsav Gupta, a member of the city's Utilities Advisory Commission, raised the alarm about the SFPUC planning rates based on a drought that hasn't happened in 1,100 years, according to tree-ring data. Other agencies like Valley Water and the East Bay Municipal Utility District plan for a repeat of the worst drought on record from 1987 to 1992, but the SFPUC uses an unprecedented and severe 8.5-year drought, Gupta said in a letter to council.

SFPUC a water wholesaler

The SFPUC sells water to cities and water districts throughout the Bay Area from eight reservoirs near Yosemite. Palo Alto buys about 7% of the water, or about 9.5 million gallons per day.

As an example of hoarding, Gupta pointed to the SFPUC declaring a water shortage emergency in November 2021. The SFPUC asked customers to conserve water despite having more than 303.9 billion gallons — four years worth of water — in its reservoirs, Gupta said.

“Then when the rains come back, that water all gets spilled,” former Mayor Peter Drekmeier told the Utilities Advisory Commission on May 6. “And people wonder, ‘Wait a minute, why were we conserving so much?’”

Drekmeier is the policy director for the Yosemite Rivers Alliance, a nonprofit that wants the SFPUC to follow a plan to release more water into the San Francisco Bay-Delta for salmon to survive.

The SFPUC’s “irrational fear of water shortages” has already led to rate increases, like a 5% drought surcharge from April 2022 to May 2023, Drekmeier said in a letter to council on June 4.

The SFPUC released an infrastructure plan in February 2024 that laid out $4 to $10 billion in projects, such as recycled water plants and reservoir expansions.

These projects will unnecessarily drive up rates, and the increased costs will make residents and businesses use less water, Drekmeier said.

‘Death spiral’

“This is known as a death spiral,” he said. “As prices increase, sales decline and prices must increase even further.”

Palo Alto is one of 26 cities and water districts in the Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency, or BAWSCA. BAWSCA represents two-thirds of the SFPUC’s water sales and includes Stanford, CalWater, Redwood City, Menlo Park, East Palo Alto and Mountain View.

Vice Mayor Greer Stone has been Palo Alto’s representative on BAWSCA for the last three years, and he’s been trying to get BAWSCA to stop rubber-stamping the SFPUC’s drought projections. But SFPUC is a monopoly, and BAWSCA’s leverage is limited, Stone said on Monday.

Stone said he’s been trying to build relationships and gain “soft power,” and the city of Menlo Park has been a good partner.

Residents are supportive of Stone’s efforts. Some wanted council to go further by updating the city’s water shortage contingency plan with statements pushing back on the SFPUC’s drought projections.

“Rates going through the roof and starving the Bay of promised water for no good reason are the result of this modeling,” Ventura resident Becky Sanders said at the meeting.

“It is vital for our city to push back as much as possible, Evergreen Park resident Terry Holzmer said.

Council approved the five-year water shortage contingency plan as written, despite the misgivings over the SFPUC’s drought projections.

The plan is due to the state’s Department of Water Resources by July 1, so Utilities Director Alan Kurotori said Monday’s meeting was too late to make changes.

Council added a disclaimer: “This is not an endorsement or concurrence in those analyses, and the city reserves its right to object to those analyses in other fora.”

Council will have a study session to discuss water after its summer break.

# # #

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California Needs Water and Clean Power. It Might Have a Fix for Both.

A pilot program is building solar panels over irrigation canals to generate electricity. As a bonus, the shade prevents water from evaporating.

New York Times | June 22, 2026 | Quinn Glabicki

A test site in Turlock, Calif. Researchers estimated that covering the state's open canals with solar could generate 13 gigawatts and save 63 billion gallons of water annually.CreditCredit...Nathan Weyland for The New York Times

In California, a sprawling 4,000-mile network of canals winds through citrus orchards and fields of tree nuts, delivering irrigation and drinking water to homes and farms across the state.

The canals are critical in an increasingly arid part of the country. But what if they could help fulfill another urgent need: renewable energy?

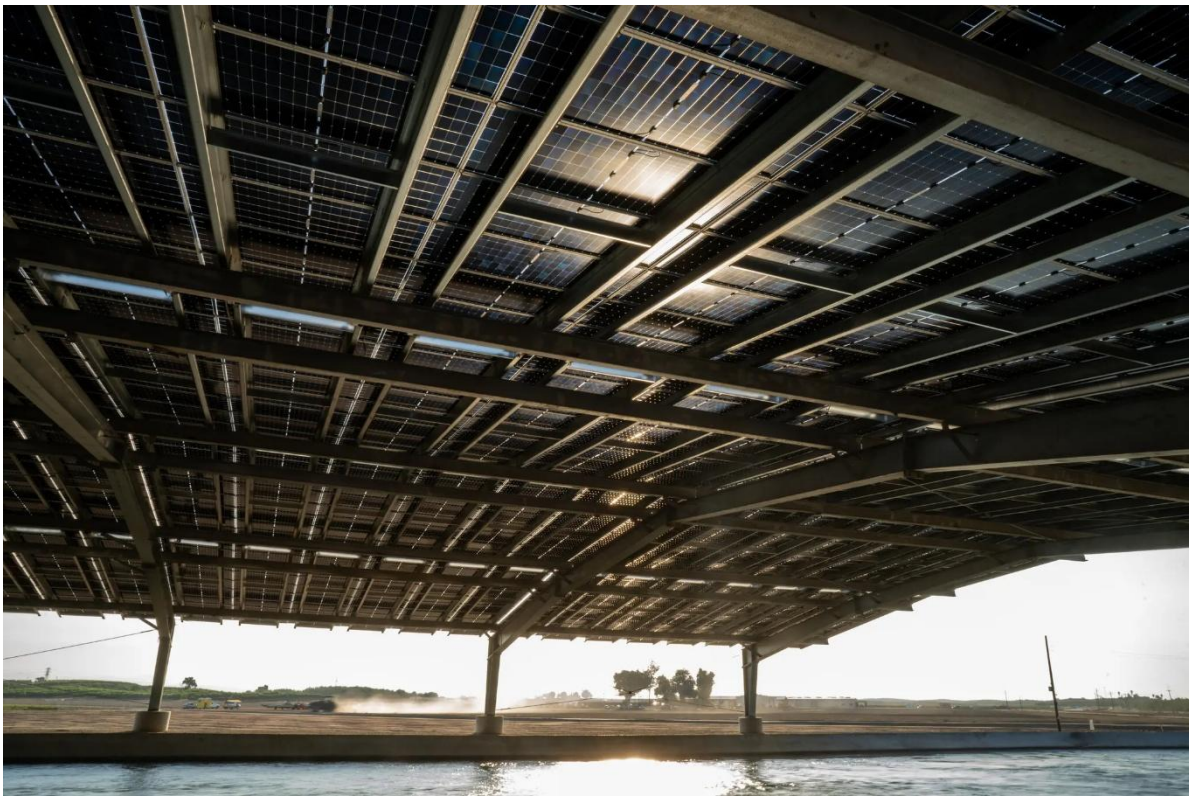
To test that idea, researchers, private enterprise and a public utility in the Central Valley are installing solar panels atop the man-made waterways.

The pilot program, called Project Nexus, is testing solar canopies that researchers say could generate gigawatts of power and save billions of gallons of water by providing shade that slows evaporation. It could be transformational if scaled up, researchers say, in helping the state to meet its ambitious climate and biodiversity goals.

California aims to generate 60 percent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030 and to rely entirely on carbon-free energy by 2045. It also aims to conserve 30 percent of its open land by 2030. Placing solar panels above the canals, rather than on undeveloped land or competing for space with agricultural interests, could be a double win.

The project grew out of a 2021 study by researchers at the University of California, Merced, that aimed to assess the viability of solar installations throughout California's canal network.

That simulation modeled the effects of covering all 4,000 miles of the state's major open canals with solar panels. Researchers projected doing so could generate some 13 gigawatts of solar power (roughly half the new solar capacity needed to meet California's energy targets) and save 63 billion gallons of water annually (enough to serve 2 million people or 50,000 acres of farmland).



The Project Nexus test installations cover an area the size of one-and-a-half football fields and generate 1.6 megawatts of energy.Credit...Nathan Weyland for The New York Times

The various shapes, conditions and locations of the canals make the study's maximum projections nearly impossible to achieve in real life, said Brandi McKuin, a project scientist at U.C. Merced and lead author of the study. And the costs would be higher than building solar farms on land. "It's probably unrealistic to assume that we're going to cover all 4,000 miles of California's canals," she said.

But the modeling showed that building solar on even a portion of the waterways could make a meaningful contribution to energy production and water conservation.

The study received global attention and, soon after it was published, the state of California contacted Dr. McKuin with a question: Could she prove it?

The next year, with $20 million in state funds and a mandate to test their projections, Dr. McKuin and her colleagues found location in the agrarian corridor south of Modesto and a partner in the 139-year-old Turlock Irrigation District, the oldest canal operator in the state. The community-owned utility operates 250 miles of canals and distributes electricity to 240,000 people.

There, Project Nexus partners including the irrigation district, U.C. Merced and a development firm called Solar AquaGrid tested designs, eventually constructing steel scaffolding above two canals, a narrow one no wider than an alleyway and a larger one roughly the width of an eight-lane highway. Together, the installations cover an area about the size of one-and-a-half football fields, generating a combined 1.6 megawatts of power.

They built panels facing south and west, experimenting with a rail system that allows workers to pull the panels aside to access the canal below, all in an effort to prove that the concept might work for the myriad canal types winding across California and beyond.

Having gathered data over a full irrigation season, Dr. McKuin said the initial results from Project Nexus are encouraging.

Preliminary readings from sensors placed in the canal indicate that the shade from the solar panels reduced water evaporation by up to 70 percent. The panels also slowed photosynthesis, reducing aquatic weeds and algae by up to 85 percent.

Solar-covered canals aren’t an entirely novel idea. Two were completed more than a decade ago in Gujarat, in western India. And along I-10 south of Phoenix, the Gila River Indian Community built a project in 2024.

Construction of an earlier project above a canal near Ahmedabad, India, in 2012.Credit...Ajit Solanki/Associated Press

Stephen Roe Lewis of the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona in 2024, as solar panels were prepared to be placed over a canal.Credit...Ross D. Franklin/Associated Press

The Gila River project ended up generating 1.5 megawatts of power, 25 percent more than estimates, possibly because the cooling effect of water can make solar panels more efficient. Water temperature dropped a full degree as it traversed 3,500 feet of shaded canal, with no algae growth, said David DeJong, the irrigation project director. He predicted a “paradigm shift” in the West if the technology were to be widely adopted.

Despite the promising initial results, Dr. McKuin said more research would be needed before scaling up the concept. “It’s still really early to say what the economic feasibility of this is,” she said.

A new report from U.C. Merced, expected in the coming months, will be “critical” to determine whether the Turlock Irrigation District will invest in more solar canals, said Josh Weimer, the district’s director of external affairs. Putting solar panels above a canal is more expensive than installing them on an empty patch of desert, and for districts like Turlock to adopt the technology, Weimer said, the construction costs would need to be offset by the combined value of the conserved water, land-acquisition savings and the reduction in aquatic weed maintenance.

The California Department of Water Resources said it is watching closely as it considers solar canals for portions of the State Water Project, a large network of canals and other infrastructure that delivers water to 27 million people. Ultimately, the data from Project Nexus will be “essential” to understanding how solar canals perform in the real world, said Andrew Schwarz, the agency’s climate action manager, in a written statement.

The technology is “absolutely” ready to be developed at scale, said Roger Bales, professor emeritus of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the U.C. Merced who has worked on Project Nexus since its inception. Now, his goal is to build the first 100 miles.

Looking ahead, he thinks solar canals in California could feasibly generate up to a gigawatt of power in the next decade. “We have to get to a hundred miles, and then it might take off,” he said.

The key is finding the “low-hanging fruit,” said Jordan Harris, the chief executive of Solar AquaGrid, for example identifying places across California where canals are adjacent to a localized energy need. That could be a water-pumping station or an electric-vehicle charger along the highway, or anywhere local electrical lines can accept power without the need to build new transmission lines.

# # #

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California's water crisis driving higher interest in desalination as a new source
ABC 7 News | June 21, 2026 | Drew Tuma and Tim Didion

SAN FRANCISCO (KGO) -- From a fast-melting snowpack in the Sierra to over-pumped groundwater in the Central Valley and a drought on the Colorado River, California's water supply is facing enormous pressure. Increasingly, some believe the only real alternative is to draw water from the Pacific Ocean offshore.

Former Water Manager Tim Quinn believes he and his team at OceanWell can do it safely and more affordably.

We first profiled the company's technology several years ago. It works by placing a series of collection pods on the ocean floor. The pods take advantage of the intense pressure at lower depths to force seawater through a system of salt-filtering membranes. The fresh, desalinized water is then pumped to shore, leaving the leftover salt, known as brine, to drift out to sea -- which, according to the company, helps avoid a core environmental criticism of traditional onshore desalination plants.

"We do it out in the ocean at depth 400 meters or deeper. And when you go down there, most of the problems that you have onshore are solved just by moving the location of your reverse osmosis process," Quinn said.

The company just released data from an ongoing study on a reservoir in Southern California. They say the system produces water roughly 10 times purer than conventional drinking water, without damaging surrounding marine organisms.

"We're about halfway through this five-year process of improving the technology. And so far, everything has worked out exactly the way we intended it to. So, the framework of putting it in Santa Monica Bay is there," Quinn said.

It comes at a time of renewed interest in desal.

Case in point, take a look at the massive Carlsbad ocean-desalination plant, originally built to help supply water-starved San Diego County.

Flash forward a decade, and operators are now reportedly in negotiations to sell a portion of their surplus to two western neighbors: Arizona and Nevada. It's a kind of supply swap in which those states pay for the water used in San Diego, including desalinated water, while San Diego releases a portion of its Colorado River water rights in return.

The flexibility is catching the attention of water managers in other parts of California.

Jake Walsh is vice president of engineering at San Jose Water.

"Desalination is used across the world as a source of water. And it is something we're actively looking at here, because we have the Pacific Ocean to our west. We have the bay to our north. And so, it is the source of water that we need to investigate," Walsh said.

The agency is in exploratory talks with OceanWell as part of a broad sustainability program that encompasses other technologies, such as enhanced wastewater purification. Walsh says the goal is to future-proof San Jose's water system against threats ranging from drought and climate change to disruptions in the state's water delivery system.

"Especially with the state of the Delta -- the concerns we have with its reliability longterm. If we have a large earthquake, it's at risk of failing. And it's a concern for us. So that's why we need to develop local water supply sources," he said.

Back in Southern California, OceanWell hopes to move forward with its first project in Santa Monica Bay over the next several years: a deep-sea water farm deployed several miles off the coast of Malibu. And while it's taken years to prove the technology, Quinn said he believes the timing is right for a new water source for California.

"I have never seen a situation as dire as the one we're facing right now, where both of our freshwater systems in Northern California and on the Colorado River are in very dire condition, of course, that their condition creates opportunities in the ocean. Well, we want to help solve those problems," Quinn said.

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Newsom looks to lock in his water agenda

Politico | July 7, 2026 | Camille Von Kaenel

Gavin Newsom's leaving office soon, and he's getting his ducks in a row. | Jae C. Hong/AP

WATER BOARD WATCH: Gov. Gavin Newsom is putting his stamp on the powerful agency overseeing California's biggest water fights — and racing to get his pet projects across the finish line before his term ends.

Jared Blumenfeld, Newsom's former CalEPA secretary, took his seat for the first time Tuesday on the five-member State Water Resources Control Board days after Newsom appointed him to replace Laurel Firestone, the environmental justice advocate who stepped down last month to "pursue other opportunities" in water.

Blumenfeld's arrival gives Newsom a deeply experienced ally on the board right as the agency is preparing to make final decisions on Newsom's water priorities. These include a long-delayed master plan for the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Bay Delta, as well as water right permits for the Sites Reservoir and the Delta Conveyance Project, the controversial 45-mile long tunnel to divert more water from Northern to Southern California.

Together, those decisions will help determine how much water California can store and distribute to both cities and powerful agricultural interests in the Central Valley, and how much must stay in rivers to support ecosystems and fish.

Blumenfeld brings both experience and deep ties with Newsom to his new gig. He ran San Francisco's Environment Department when Newsom was mayor before serving as the U.S. EPA's regional administrator for the Pacific Southwest under then-President Barack Obama. When Newsom was elected governor, Blumenfeld served as CalEPA chief in his administration from 2019 to 2022. Most recently, he headed the Waverley Street Foundation, Laurene Powell Jobs' climate philanthropy.

Blumenfeld gave Newsom a warm shoutout in his first remarks as a board member Tuesday, thanking him "for challenging Californians to move beyond the old binaries and reject the false choice between protecting our environment and building a prosperous future."

Still, environmentalists opposing Newsom's water projects are wary, given that Blumenfeld has played such a central role in developing Newsom's preferred alternative for the master Bay-Delta plan that is now expected to come before the board for a final vote this year.

As CalEPA secretary, Blumenfeld negotiated with water agencies to craft "voluntary agreements," now known as the "Healthy Rivers and Landscapes" program, to replace tough mandatory flow rules in the Bay-Delta watershed with looser ones, packaged with more dollars for habitat restoration. Water agencies say the deals offer a more flexible way to restore habitat and manage supplies, but environmental groups, fishing groups and tribes have long argued the plan is too weak and too deferential to water users, potentially harming endangered species.

Eric Buescher, managing attorney at San Francisco Baykeeper, said that Blumenfeld's history with the deals is a "pretty good indication" of where he might go as a board member. He sees Blumenfeld's appointment as a sign Newsom is tightening his grip on the water board, he said. Another sign: The governor recently urged a water board judge to give the Sites Reservoir a more flexible water right permit.

"I disagree with Gov. Newsom about most things California water, but he knows what he's doing," Buescher said. "He's a politically shrewd guy." His group is withholding judgment until it has a chance to engage with Blumenfeld or until he starts casting votes, Buescher added.

Some water agencies are openly welcoming the pick. "He has the background and experience from that time that could carry through," said the Association of California Water Agencies' Chelsea Haines.

Blumenfeld's appointment is not unique. Newsom recently placed a number of trusted former aides and allies in key positions, including Jason Elliott on the California High-Speed Rail Authority board and Jim DeBoo on the Central Valley Flood Protection Board.

But Felicia Marcus, the former water board chair whom Newsom declined to reappoint in 2019 after she advanced Bay-Delta flow requirements that environmentalists supported and water agencies fiercely opposed, cast Blumenfeld as an experienced operator, and not just a Newsom loyalist.

“It’s great that they’re replacing Laurel [Firestone] with somebody with so much experience on the issues and in government, because it’s a very complicated role,” Marcus said.

Newsom’s office also shifted longtime board member Dorene “DeeDee” D’Adamo into Firestone’s seat, an appointment which expires next year, while slotting Blumenfeld into a longer-term position. The maneuver gives Blumenfeld a longer runway, signaling Newsom is trying to plant a flag on water policy that will outlast his administration.

That is, until and unless the next governor — most likely Democrat Xavier Becerra — decides to switch things up completely. — CvK

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Governor appoints Thomas Gibson as Director of the Department of Water Resources

Office of Governor Gavin Newsom | June 29, 2026

Thomas Gibson. Director of the California Department of Water Resources

Thomas Gibson, of West Sacramento, has been appointed Director at the California Department of Water Resources.

Gibson has been Chief Deputy Director at the California Department of Water Resources since 2024, where he was Chief Counsel from 2021 to 2024. He held multiple positions at the California Natural Resources Agency from 2014 to 2020, including Deputy Secretary and Special Counsel for Water, Undersecretary, and General Counsel.

Gibson held multiple positions at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife from 2007 to 2014, including General Counsel and Assistant Chief Counsel.

He held several roles at Best, Best, & Krieger LLP from 2002 to 2008, including Partner and Associate. Gibson was an Associate at Hyman, Phelps & McNamara PC from 1999 to 2002 and at Kronick, Moskovitz, Tiedemann & Girard PC from 1997 to 1999.

He earned a Juris Doctor degree from the Northwestern School of Law of Lewis & Clark College and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from University of California, Davis.

This position requires Senate confirmation and the compensation is $245,288. Gibson is registered without party preference.

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