

2015 Water Year – Current Drought Conditions and Where We Go from Here

Summary: Water resource managers and experts will provide an overview of California's current water supply conditions and operations, the current health of the Delta ecosystem and fisheries; and describe how California is responding to impacts from the drought and what other options may be available if the drought continues into the 2016 water year and for future severe drought events.

Background

The Council regularly receives briefings on California's water supply conditions, the health of the Delta ecosystem, and the activities of the local and State agencies that manage water supplies and wildlife throughout California. As the current drought has progressed, the Council has had the opportunity to engage with agency officials as they progressed from planning just as the drought began to take hold, to managing the impacts as the intensity of the drought became clear, and finally, to where we are today – doing everything possible to stretch California's limited water supplies. California is in its fourth drought year. It is not only the span of the drought that is challenging the State, but the intensity relative to past events. Overall, this drought is testing California's ability to maintain the parity between the coequal goals of maintaining a reliable water supply and protecting, restoring and enhancing the Delta ecosystem.

- At the July 2013 Council meeting, a panel of State and local water managers first discussed the conditions of the emerging drought. During the meeting, the Council learned of the plans that were in place to manage the conditions of a second dry year, including cutting back diversions from the Delta to water suppliers in the Bay Area and in the Central Valley ([July Drought Staff Report](#)).
- Six months later, on January 17, 2014, the Governor's first declared a State of Emergency and directed State officials to take all necessary actions to prepare for the developing drought ([State of Emergency Declaration](#)).
- At the January and February 2014 Council meetings, the Council heard from State and local officials about how the 2014 water year was shaping up to be the driest period on record for California. While California did receive some precipitation in the early spring of 2014, the drought continued on and storage conditions were precariously low for many areas ([January Drought Staff Report](#), [February Drought Staff Report](#)).
- On April 25, 2014 the Governor issued an Executive Order to redouble drought actions. Included in the Executive Order was a directive for the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) to issue emergency water conservation regulations for urban water use and for Californians to cut their water use by 20 percent compared to their 2013 water use ([2014 Executive Order](#)).

- The Central Valley Project had zero allocation for its agricultural contractors and the State Water Project (SWP) provided only a 5 percent 2014 allocation. Agencies in charge of the water projects sought regulatory relief from water quality requirements in the Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan from the SWRCB in order to provide water for human life and safety.
- As a result of the water supply cutbacks, farmers relied heavily on water transfers and groundwater pumping to grow their remaining crops. Partly in recognition of the heavy dependence on groundwater and the degradation of some of the State's groundwater basins, the Legislature passed and the Governor signed the historic Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, which provides several interim steps to ensure that California's groundwater basins will be in a sustainable balance by 2040.
- In 2014, 428,000 acres of farmland were fallowed and California's farm economy suffered \$1.5 billion in lost production.
- Conditions looked to be improving in December 2014 as California received heavy precipitation. The January-March period, however, was not only the driest on record, but the winter was exceptionally warm. By April 1, 2015 California's snowpack had shrunk to 5 percent of normal. What water remains in California's reservoirs represents California's remaining surface water supply – a dangerous outlook for California if the drought persists into the 2016 water year.
- On April 1, 2015 the Governor issued a second Executive Order ([2015 Executive Order](#)). Three key elements of this order include; mandated urban water conservation of 25 percent compared to 2013 usage data and a substantial increase in the number of agricultural water suppliers who have to develop water management plans; called for the development of permanent water conservation regulations which SWRCB are currently working on; and implement, when needed, the emergency drought barrier project to preserve, to the extent possible, the water quality in the Delta. To facilitate prompt installation of the barriers, if necessary, the California Environmental Quality Act and the Delta Reform Act's requirement for certification of Delta Plan consistency are suspended.

Today's Briefing

The purpose of today's meeting is two-fold; 1) to inform the Council about the status of California's current and forecasted water supply conditions and how it is affecting the Delta ecosystem; and 2) to highlight some of the drastic actions being taken by the State and local water suppliers to extend the limited supplies and to make water available where it is most needed. The panel members include:

- **Karla Nemeth**, deputy secretary for water policy at the California Natural Resources Agency, will provide opening remarks, as well as participate on a panel to discuss available options to address future conditions if the drought persists.

- **Ellen Hanak**, a senior fellow with the Public Policy Institute of California, will provide a briefing on possible future options to manage drought conditions.
- **Jeanine Jones**, DWR interstate resources manager, will provide an overview of the State's water supply picture entering into the summer.
- **A representative from USBR (tentative)** will provide a status update on the ecosystem and fishery conditions, future forecast of impacts due to drought and plans to address these impacts.
- **Michael George**, the Delta watermaster, will provide an overview of the State's regulatory actions to help manage the drought.
- **Leah Orloff**, water resources manager with Contra Costa Water District will provide an overview on how the water district addresses the impacts from the drought on their operations and rate payers.
- **Steve Mello**, president of reclamation district 563, director of North Delta Water Agency, board member of the Central Valley Flood Control Association, and a Delta farmer from Tyler Island, will discuss the impacts from drought on his farming operations.

The Council may wish to consider the following questions during this meeting:

- The current drought has brought much of California's water management deficiencies to light. The drought also has been the catalyst for significant water management improvements (groundwater management legislation, the passage of Prop. 1, and the forthcoming water conservation regulations) that might otherwise have been impossible to move forward. Can the water resource managers who presented today identify other sensitive, yet critical changes that should be advanced in today's environment that may have been dismissed two years ago?
- If water managers had known in 2013 how severe the impacts from this drought would be in just two years, – what would they have done differently? How would water managers plan for the ecosystem and the fisheries differently?
- There are many water managers who call for the development of additional storage. If the State had developed this additional storage prior to the start of this drought (5 MAF of storage), would the State still be in the same current conditions?

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