

Opinion California is backsliding on water conservation. L.A. can't and won't follow suit



The San Luis Reservoir is only 10% full, its lowest level in 27 years, in Gustine, Calif., on Aug. 28 (Los Angeles Times)

By **Mark Gold**

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Last month, California's Water Resources Control Board took the easy way out on water conservation. In 2015, California nearly met Governor Brown's mandatory water conservation goal of 25% thanks to transparent monthly reporting and identifying profligate water wasters. The water board even fined a few of the worst water hogs to demonstrate how serious it was about getting urban Californians to live within their water means.

Then, despite the fact that numerous reservoirs in Central California are already nearly empty, and that our "strongest El Niño on record" turned into just an average precipitation and snowfall year in northern California, the state evidently decided that California survived its ongoing water crisis.

When pressed by urban water agencies about the difficulty of meeting conservation targets — and the lost revenues resulting from reduced consumption — the state board relented. Instead of the strict mandates our

state needs, water agencies were asked to assume the drought would only last for three more years, and develop conservation “targets” (instead of mandates) based on that rosy assumption.

Given this lenient “stress test,” 343 of 411 (84%) of the largest water districts in the state concluded they had adequate water supplies for the next three years. Statewide, only 35 water districts decided to keep their conservation targets in place.

Not surprisingly, the state’s conservation efforts are already backsliding. Urban water savings dropped significantly in July from last year’s mandatory program. Here in the Southland, the most glaring example of this new freedom to waste comes from Malibu-Topanga area residents, who use an average of 254 gallons of water per day — more than 8% higher than a year ago and more than five times higher than residents in Huntington Park, Paramount and East LA.

Meanwhile, the five-year drought continues, with Los Angeles receiving less than 39 inches of rain over that time period: less than 8 inches annually.

The outcome of replacing the mandatory water conservation targets with a self-certification conservation approach was predictable. We’ve seen time and time again that voluntary water conservation programs are not successful — especially in the long run. One only has to look back at Gov. Brown’s 2014 request for voluntary 20% urban water use reductions to see that the approach doesn’t work.

Why would water districts submit mandatory conservation targets that could potentially open them up to future liability and reduced revenues?

Water agencies and the public need a stick to remind them of how important conservation is to the state’s future.

We need the State Water Board to develop permanent mandatory water conservation thresholds, not voluntary targets. This is especially crucial for the nearly two-thirds of the state that is still in severe, extreme or exceptional drought — conditions that have turned L.A. County into a tinder box, with devastating consequences for both life and property.

Whether California will step up to the task at hand remains to be seen.

Thankfully, despite the state’s rollback, many local water agencies here in the Southland are doubling down on water conservation. L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti committed the city to reducing water consumption from 131 gallons per capita per day of residential commercial and industrial use in 2014 to 104 gallons per capita per day by January 2017. Angelenos are already starting to meet that target ahead of schedule. In the last year they’ve saved far more water (approximately 40 billion gallons, or 123,000 acre feet) than Long Beach uses in a year.

L.A. approved a tough water conservation ordinance in April, a residential water budget, audit and enforcement program, and a four-tiered rate structure that rewards residents who conserve water while penalizing water hogs as much as is allowed under Proposition 218 constraints.

In addition, both Santa Monica and L.A. County are developing water neutrality ordinances to ensure that new development won't use more water than the previous tenant on the parcel. Santa Monica has also developed commercial and residential site-specific water budgets with an enforcement program, and that has been very effective. They've given the most egregious water wasters a choice between paying substantial fines or attending water school. Most violators have opted for online water conservation school.

But despite this progress, challenges remain to keeping the Southland on a sustainable target.

The Building Industry Assn. has threatened legal action over proposed water neutrality ordinances, arguing that new development already has to pay for sewer hookup fees to improve infrastructure and that requiring noncomplying new development to pay for offsite conservation measures would be unfair and illegal. This threat has slowed these important ordinances, despite the fact that developers would only have to pay for offsite conservation improvements if they can't comply on the site of their proposed development.

Of course longer-term, desperately needed solutions like water recycling, stormwater capture and groundwater remediation are still a ways off. State financial support for local water projects is still absolutely essential for the region to lessen its reliance on imported water. And despite the state's recent actions on conservation, it has plans to develop and release mandatory conservation measures in 2017.

In order to move toward sustainable water management in California, these measures need to be bold and permanent. If they aren't, then conservation efforts will largely be ineffective — and the future of our water supply will be a whole lot cloudier than our skies.

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