

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

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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.

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Coke Hallowell is board chairman of the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust. Folsom is the trust's board president.

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