

# **EDITORIAL: So many ideas, so little progress in addressing drought**

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## **State and federal leaders must start making crucial decisions.**

By The Fresno Bee Editorial Board

Fresno

March 20, 2014



A Harris Ranch executive surveys an idled brown field on the company's farm in western Fresno County.

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The third year of the California drought brings a reminder of just how fractured and messy democracy can be. There have been dozens of proposals -- seven versions of a state water bond, for example -- to improve the water situation and more are surely on the way.

We're wondering if the politicians are even keeping track of all that has been proposed. To a degree, we understand why this effort is complicated. California is a large and diverse state. Our elected officials represented widely varying interests and constituencies. And tossing out ideas is part of the process -- especially as lawmakers attempt to balance environmental concerns against the need to store and move water.

But do we need this many ideas? At times, it appears that some folks are simply looking for a headline or to build a political legacy -- instead of helping California responsibly deal with its water crisis.

How do our leaders hope to do right by farmers, city dwellers, fish and wildlife?

Let us briefly review the ways.

Gov. Jerry Brown and some water contractors propose to build massive water tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta as a means of restoring California's vital estuary and increasing the certainty of water availability south of the delta.

There have been calls by members of the state's congressional delegation to build large new dams on the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, enlarge Shasta Dam, complete Auburn Dam and expand San Luis Reservoir.

And Sen. Dianne Feinstein -- who helped broker the agreement -- has said it's time to take a second look at San Joaquin River restoration and the plan to restore salmon runs there.

Add the customary requests for more underground water banking and added investment in conservation measures, and someone looking down at California from 30,000 feet would conclude that our efforts to combat the drought in the short term and find long-term solutions in the face of climate change is a three-ring circus with no one in charge.

Gov. Brown has his tunnels proposal, which has yet to be fully vetted.

The Legislature wants some kind of water bond that seeks more above-ground storage -- the disagreements are over how expensive the bond will be, who will pay for it and how much money goes to dams.

The House of Representatives and U.S. Senate have separate plans to deal with the California drought. Each one bears the philosophical stamp of the party that controls its body. Good luck getting the gridlocked Democrats and Republicans inside the Beltway to agree on a compromise that becomes law.

President Barack Obama has weighed in on the California drought. During his visit to Fresno last month, he said: "We're going to have to figure out how to play a different game. We can't afford years of litigation and no real action."

Yet, five weeks later, we've seen no real action -- other than emergency relief -- out of the White House.

Sometimes things do get done, as was the case Tuesday after at least 1,000 people jammed into the rodeo grounds near the San Joaquin River in Firebaugh. Farmers and their workers cheered for politicians who were critical of the Brown administration's actions -- and inaction -- on the water crisis.

Later in the day, state water leaders in Sacramento announced that farmers would be able to get whatever water becomes available after public health and safety needs are met. State officials said they made the change because of above-average rainfall in February.

First in line for that additional water: west-side land owners with historic river water rights dating to the 1800s. In addition, there is the possibility of water for wildlife refuges. This is important. Without water, there's a greater chance of disease among birds and waterfowl.

A short-term decision such as this one is relatively easy. The tough battles are waged over the big proposals, such as spending billions of dollars to construct or raise dams and living with the environmental impacts.

Wednesday, emotional farmers testified at Fresno City Hall about the devastating consequences of the drought during a House Natural Resources Committee field hearing. The hearing was at the request of Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford, whose bill calling for dams and repeal of San Joaquin River restoration has passed the House, but has little or no chance of clearing the Senate.

The farmers' pain is real. Small growers, especially, face the possibility of losing their farms if they don't get water. But much of the focus Wednesday was on criticizing environmental regulations -- and the threatened delta smelt. On signs and in testimony, the refrain of fish vs. people was repeated.

But the crisis and its solutions aren't that simple. The battle playing out also pits farmer vs. farmer -- just ask a delta farmer what he thinks of "his" water being moved south. This fight, too, involves farmer vs. developer -- although sometimes they are one and the same. And while the big growers can afford to pay \$1,000 or more an acre-foot for somebody else's surplus water, the small guy can't. When the small guy goes under, you can bet the big growers will buy up their land.

At some point, the debate has to move beyond whether or not to build more dams. There needs to be a discussion about possibly limiting the number of thirsty almond trees grown in California. Given that ag gets the lion's share of California water, we should figure out how much land should be farmed. And how many golf courses we need. We should figure out, too, the amount of water needed to maintain a healthy delta.

Apparently, we'd rather chase our tails until the rains return and put off the hard decisions for another day.