

EDITORIAL: California is challenged by drought — and simple math

By The Fresno Bee Editorial Board



Over the decades, California has awarded water rights and allocations that far exceed the available supply.

MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ — AP

When it comes to water, the state of California is like the inept parent who can't say no to the kids.

Thanks to University of California researchers, we now know that the state has overpromised on water delivery and underdelivered.

How large is the shortfall?

Tie yourself to a chair before reading on because you might slap yourself in the head and fall over backward.

Here's what The Sacramento Bee's Matt Weiser wrote on Tuesday: "California's total freshwater runoff in an average year is about 70 million acre-feet, according to the (UC) study. But the state has handed out junior water rights totaling 370 million acre-feet."

Do the math.

The state has assigned rights for more than five times the amount of water available in an average year — never mind a drought year or three consecutive drought years such as we are experiencing.

Unfortunately for farmers, other businesses reliant on water and residents watching their shrubbery die, the facts get worse.

The researchers only did the math for water rights allocated after 1914. Unaccounted for in their calculations were pre-1914 holders of senior water rights.

Is it any wonder that California's water battles are fierce and never ending? The state has created expectations that can be met only with a deluge requiring construction of a biblical ark to survive.

"They give these rights-holders a false sense of security," UC Merced Engineering Professor Joshua Viers, a co-author of the study, told Weiser. "It's an entitlement that may never be filled. That is unfortunate because we continue to allocate water rights to this day."

There is a contrarian view that granting rights to water that doesn't exist isn't a bad thing. Craig Wilson, Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta water master for the State Water Resources Control Board, says that excess allocation of water is "overblown."

Wilson's reasoning? Many rights-holders use less water than their permits allow and some of their irrigation water returns to canals or streams as runoff for others to use.

But Wilson's theory is based on anecdotal observation, not facts. Understand: the state doesn't require water rights-holders to report what they take in real time. Neither does the state verify for accuracy the annual reports of water users.

Is gross oversubscription a rational basis for assigning water rights and permits in a Western state with 38 million people?

Only if you believe in fairy tales with a wizard who turns one bottle of water into five.

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