

## Editorial: Water rules mandate a different world

By the Editorial Board

As Gov. Jerry Brown announced the [first mandatory water restriction in state history](#) on Wednesday, with the Sierra Nevada snowpack at a grim 5 percent of normal, the message was clear: Time's up. No more delays.

After three grinding years of drought, Brown has taken serious action. To which we say: Finally.

Brown is to be commended for heeding the alarm bells. But California's response to this slow-motion natural disaster has been nerve-wrackingly tentative until now.

Groundwater reserves are [dwindling](#). Hydroelectric turbines have [slowed](#), lacking water to power them. Yosemite's Half Dome, typically snowbound in spring, is [bald to the granite](#).

A survey out last week from the Public Policy Institute of California found that two Californians in three feel that water supplies have reached worrisome levels – and that their neighbors [aren't doing enough about it](#).

But the \$1 billion-plus [emergency drought bill](#) signed by the governor last week was a cobbled-together mishmash that consisted mostly of flood control money from a bond approved by voters in 2006. And the timeline on the groundwater management legislation passed last year was so, well, watered down by agriculture lobbyists that communities don't even have to have a plan for sustainable water management until 2020, or achieve it until 2040.

Picture the already dry and dusty Central Valley. Now imagine how parched it will be after a couple of more decades of status quo.

Brown's mandate for a [25 percent reduction in cities and towns](#) from 2013 levels needs to be just the beginning. His call last year for a voluntary 20 percent fell far short of needed savings.

Some cities, such as Los Angeles, have been models. But others – including Sacramento – only recently have [gotten with the program](#). Locals have made progress, but we must do better. It's disgraceful that tens of thousands of existing homes still lack water meters here.

Despite Brown's call for Californians to "pull together," the mandate was strangely urban in emphasis. Drought-tolerant landscaping, cash-for-grass programs, rebates for low-flow toilets, cuts in water for cemeteries and golf courses – these are all great, but about 80 percent of the state's developed water flows to agriculture.

Other than a requirement for better reporting on water use, the better to crack down on illegal diversions, Brown doesn't seem to be asking ag interests to do much more than they're already doing, which isn't sufficient.

Yes, water allocations for farmers already are set for next year, and yes, they're spartan. But one of the most glaring features of the Central Valley is the vast acreage committed to long-term crops like almonds.

[Advocates pointed out](#) that, since last year, the Westlands Water District has been on pace to pump more than a million acre-feet of groundwater from the Central Valley by the end of 2015. That, they said, is more water than Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco use in a year, put together.

Are the nut orchards that the water feeds – and their profits for farmers and investors – truly so crucial that Westlands and others can't scale it back some? Two-thirds of the water Californians used last year was groundwater.

Not extending the mandates to underground aquifers, or speeding up implementation of last year's groundwater

regulations, forgoes huge potential savings. Yet in a 100-minute-long conference call with reporters Wednesday, state officials repeatedly insisted that this was “not a great time” to address the voracious pumping that’s going on up and down the state.

Overall, however, the state mandates are beyond necessary at this point. The very ground beneath the governor’s feet was evidence enough. Where there should have been Sierra snow, dry grass rustled.

“It’s a different world,” Brown said.

Time for California to wake up.