

EDITORIAL: Where is your long-term water plan, Gov. Brown?



Low water at Millerton Lake with Millerton Courthouse at right, high above the waterline.

JOHN WALKER — The Fresno Bee

In his reincarnation as California governor, Jerry Brown's approach has been cautious — except on a handful of issues such as green energy, high-speed rail, K-12 education, the Twin Tunnels delta water project and state government finances.

We're now wondering when, or even if, Brown will go "all in" on addressing the serious threats to prosperity and health posed by California's historic drought and the prospect of below-average rainfall and snowpack for decades to come because of global warming.

While we applaud the governor's announcement Wednesday of the first statewide water restrictions in California history, we're still not sure that Brown realizes the magnitude of the challenge.

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.

The site of Brown's announcement — a brown meadow near Lake Tahoe that typically would be buried in snow this time of year — should have been used as the backdrop for a bold plan to meet California's water demands to the end of the 21st century.

Instead, the governor told everyone to use less water. Brown is right about that. We should use less water.

But our leaders should be thinking about California's long-term needs. This means investing hundreds of billions of dollars in research, desalination plants, water reclamation, conveyance and storage (both above and below the ground.)

California is world famous for innovation. It is known for being cutting edge. And the best that Brown could come up with, on a day that the Sierra snowpack measured 5% of normal, was, c'mon, everybody, take shorter showers?

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.

This tells us that most Californians get it. We have to get serious both about cutting personal water consumption and using technology and new infrastructure to stretch every drop of water, as it has never been stretched before.

However, the signals sent by the governor and the Legislature suggest that they would rather just pray for rain.

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.

We and future generations of Californians would all be better off if Gov. Brown and the Democratic majority that dominates the Capitol had the same passion for water that they have for reducing carbon emissions and constructing a high-speed rail system.

Now that the drought is impacting large population centers in Southern California and the coast — not just the San Joaquin Valley — perhaps state leaders will begin working in earnest on long-term fixes.

There is speculation from veterans of California's water wars that Gov. Brown will announce a comprehensive strategic plan at the end of April.

We hope he does.