

EDITORIAL: On water, Big Ag should ante up, too



Almond orchards require a lot of water to grow. The state is in the fourth year of a devastating drought.

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As the rest of California comes to grips with the state's historic new water mandates, there's an elephant in the room. And it's wearing a farmer's hat.

Gov. Jerry Brown's order for a 25% cut in water consumption homed in hard on towns and cities. From now into an uncertain future, the nice voluntary things many of us have been doing — the drought-tolerant flowerbeds, the slightly shorter showers — are going to have to be just the beginning of a much more water-conscious lifestyle.

Heaven knows, it is long past time for homeowners here to wake up and smell the Dust Bowl. But with groundwater tables shrinking and the Sierra snowpack fading toward zero, with new rules that are going to cramp everyone from cemetery owners to car washers, even those of us who have already taken a hit are rethinking old habits.

So why isn't more being asked of the constituency that uses lion's share of the state's developed water?

What about agriculture?

Farmers reply that they already have given for four crushing years at the office. When droughts hit, farms are among the first to feel the effects.

More than a half-million acres of California agricultural land were fallowed last year as federal allotments from the Central Valley Project, which allocates water from the state's reservoirs, were slashed to zero. The state's farm economy lost more than \$2 billion. Seventeen thousand jobs went by the wayside, not counting the collateral damage, from truckers to dockworkers.

The toll is expected to double this year, with as many as a million acres of melons, broccoli, rice, lettuce and other crops in peril. Indisputably, agriculture has suffered.

But when the governor and others talk about this being a new era, they aren't talking just about making ends meet until things get back to normal. Normal is gone. We need to re-engineer the way we manage water in every sector, and fast.

Already, planners and advocates are talking about "net-zero" water ordinances that would force developers to balance their additional water footprint by paying for conservation elsewhere, or to make projects self-sufficient with recycled water and rainwater collected on site.

And conservationists are asking whether now is finally the time to require Californians statewide to retrofit properties with sustainable water systems, such as low-flow toilets and drip irrigation, as a condition of resale.

These are systemic changes, and we're all making them. We can't afford to let agriculture be the exception.

Unfortunately, change has never been particularly welcome in California's farm sector. And the painfully deliberate culture of the state's water regulators, which would make a snail's pace look like the Indy 500, hasn't been giving them much encouragement.

For instance, one way that farmers are partially compensating for their lost surface water is by pumping groundwater. Groundwater is precious. But in years wet and dry, and in farms and cities, Californians have tapped it to the point that we don't have nearly enough now that we're in this mess.

In our San Joaquin Valley, the aquifers have been sucked so dry that the earth is sinking. That's one reason why the state last year passed a historic groundwater bill to address the plunder.

Problem is, the timeline is so slow that decades are likely to pass before meaningful curbs are implemented. By that time, some places will be lucky to have any groundwater left.

That timeline needs to be accelerated. Yes, regulating a giant collection of shrinking underground reservoirs is a huge task. And yes, sorting out historic water rights is complex. But even battleships manage to turn when the need is urgent. We should at least make the attempt.

The governor's executive order last week offered a good start, requiring local agencies to pick up the pace on reporting and monitoring groundwater elevations, and threatening state action if they don't comply by year end.

But other aspects of the new law need to be stepped up, too. For example, incredibly, even in this grinding drought, some agricultural investors are still planting almond orchards, and, in some cases, deliberately locating them just outside the borders of irrigation districts.

It's a trick, water attorneys say: Almonds are lucrative and the lag time in the groundwater law effectively gives them a free ride into the next decade. But this kind of rogue exploitation just steals from our future. Hastening the groundwater law implementation would put some brakes on it.

Other priorities need to be fast tracked as well.

For example, the state's system, such as it is, for transferring unused water is opaque and inefficient. As many as 40% of the state's farmers, by some estimates, still use flood irrigation. Getting more drip irrigation in place, quickly, would be a huge opportunity to conserve.

From top to bottom, the culture of water regulation in California needs to somehow dig deep and start getting aggressive. This state's Water Resources Control Board's online database is antiquated and spotty, and the board still is taking years and decades to complete work that ought to be done in a few months.

Whether it's more staffing or more strategic direction, Brown needs to light a fire under his people and give them the tools to do real-time water management.

These are not overnight projects, but we can't stretch them out either. Clinging to tradition is a luxury of the past. This slow-motion natural disaster we are in has moved into high gear, and we have to be nimble. Even the elephants.