

# Gov. Jerry Brown could be a hero in our water crisis

By Bill Whalen Special to The Bee

What is it about action heroes that compels them to ride to California's rescue?

A decade ago, Arnold Schwarzenegger took on the beast that is Sacramento's political status quo. He didn't have much luck terminating the unnatural order in the state Capitol, but it was entertaining to watch.

Now, we have William Shatner – yes, Captain Kirk of “Star Trek” – taking on California's water crisis. As he recently told a Yahoo reporter: “I'm starting a Kickstarter campaign. I want \$30 billion ... to build a pipeline like the Alaska pipeline. Say, from Seattle – a place where there's a lot of water. There's too much water. How bad would it be to get a large, 4-foot pipeline, keep it above ground, because if it leaks, you're irrigating!”

Irrigating, sure. And most likely irritating to the progressive mindset that dominates the three West Coast states.

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Bill Whalen is a Hoover Institution research fellow and a former speechwriter for Gov. Pete Wilson. | Bill Whalen

We don't lack for imaginative ways to solve the Golden State's lack of liquidity. Already, there's talk of building more desalination plants along the coast, towing icebergs and importing water from Alaska. If I were a state lawmaker, I'd pass a different kind of water bond from the one voters approved last fall; my version giving Elon Musk the funding necessary to hyperloop snow from New England to Lake Tahoe.

The truth is, an “exceptional” drought such as California's doesn't require extraordinary measures. The proper remedy, in addition to the heavens crying, is for the leader of one party to step up to the challenge, while those in the party out of power step out and beyond their comfort zone.

Gov. Jerry Brown has the opportunity to bring California's disparate water factions into one room and help them overcome their parochial tendencies, some of which have made the already bad water situation worse. Those invitees would include:

- Agriculture, a favorite media villain for growing thirsty crops
- Developers, who'll have to reconsider the design of California homes
- Environmentalists, who use clean water as a bludgeon against what they see as anathema to their green agenda (dams, reservoirs and, most recently, fracking)
- Local water agencies, which will have to reconstruct their revenue models if customers obey the state's edicts to cut back on water use



If Brown uses what's left of his fourth and final gubernatorial term to develop a balanced and sensible water-use framework, he not only unties a Gordian knot, he gets a huge legacy win.

The drought is also an opening for California's Republican Party, whose 28 percent share of registered voters looks much like your local reservoir: shockingly, historically low.

To date, the GOP leadership in the Legislature has called on Brown to speed up desalination, recycling and groundwater cleanup. And they want the state to proceed with more water storage. However, to the extent that Republicans in the nation's capital have engaged in drought politics, it's been to attribute the tragedy to man-made problems (most notably, water-restriction laws that, they claim, favor fish over farmers).

For a state party trying to appeal to the unconverted, it's too one-dimensional of a message and adds to the perception of Republicans more interested in ascribing blame than prescribing remedies.

Republicans should resist the temptation to use the drought merely to zing President Barack Obama or climate-change activists. Why not, instead, broaden the conversation beyond Delta smelt?

For starters, there's California's historic water rights, which give preferential treatment to claims made more than a century ago. It's a tall order for any politician to change how California's policy rivers flow. But better to tango with the state's varied water interests than to perform a fruitless rain dance for the foreseeable future.

Bill Whalen is a Hoover Institution research fellow and former speechwriter for Gov. Pete Wilson. Whalen can be reached at [whalenoped@gmail.com](mailto:whalenoped@gmail.com).