

California urban water cuts are matter of ‘self-interest,’ state says

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Facing resistance to sweeping mandatory restrictions approved last week for urban water districts, California water board Chair Felicia Marcus defended the cuts as a matter of “self-interest” at a Senate hearing on Tuesday.

“The reason for cutting back in urban California is to build resilience in urban California,” said Marcus, who has spearheaded the official response to California’s severe drought. “It’s not about sharing the pain. It’s about self-interest in making a judgment that we have to act in urban California as if won’t rain for another couple years.”

A historic decision to mandate a 25 percent reduction in urban water use statewide has been met with pushback from communities that will face the biggest cuts, regions that have conserved historically and citizens angry that the agriculture industry, the state’s primary water consumer, wasn’t included.

At Tuesday’s hearing, Sens. Hannah-Beth Jackson, D-Santa Barbara, and Bill Monning, D-Carmel, questioned the reductions ordered in their Central Coast districts, which have among the lowest per capita water use in the state.

“Fairness is always in the eye of the beholder,” Marcus said.

She asked people to stop pointing fingers and “step up as Californians in solidarity to those folks in rural communities and those farmers in rural communities who grow the food we eat.”

While urban California still has time to change its habits and adjust to worsening drought conditions, Marcus said, there are places in the Central Valley where the state is trucking in water. More than 1,900 wells have dried out, primarily in Tulare County, and water levels have dropped by greater than 2 feet in more than 40 percent of the wells measured by the state.

“Agriculture, rural communities have borne the brunt of this,” Marcus said. “Asking people to cut back, take shorter showers and put their lawn on a water diet is very different than fields that are fallow and thousands of people out of work.”

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