

Drought could spell trouble for California Democrats

By David Siders and Christopher Cadelago
dsiders@sacbee.com

Gov. Jerry Brown, cheering the Democratic Party for successes in California in recent years – including increasing spending on education and health care – turned briefly to the “bad news” at a party gathering over the weekend.

“You can’t stay in the shower as long as you’d like to,” Brown said. “You’ve got to save some water.”

The crowd laughed.

But the reaction, over drinks and appetizers at the California Democratic Party’s annual convention that ended Sunday, belied a creeping recognition of how problematic the state’s historic drought could become for California Democrats.

“One of the things that is true, from sitting and listening to these people from around the state, they all talk about the drought,” Tom Steyer, the billionaire environmentalist, said between meetings in Anaheim. “There is no doubt that as a state we’re coming to grips with our water issues later than would have been optimal.”

Recognizing a rare liability for the majority party, Republicans have begun more aggressively criticizing Democrats for their management of the crisis. In recent weeks, Republicans have pressed the Brown administration and Democratic lawmakers to approve more water storage facilities, while excoriating Democrats and their environmentalist allies for reduced water deliveries to protect endangered fish.

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Republican Assemblywoman Shannon Grove, a critic of Democratic policies on water

Last month, on the day Brown ordered a 25 percent reduction in urban water use, U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield said in a statement that the order was “the culmination of failed federal and state policies that have exacerbated the current drought into a man-made water crisis.”

Senate Republicans publicized a letter to Brown in which they urged the fourth-term governor to expedite bond funding for water projects, and Steve Brandau, a Fresno city councilman, bought space on a billboard on Highway 99 to issue a drought-related attack on Brown’s \$68 billion high-speed rail project.

“Governor put our Water BEFORE your Train!” the billboard said.

It is not clear Republicans’ criticisms will resonate outside of Sacramento and Washington – or that voters will come to view the drought in partisan terms.

A severe drought in the 1970s did not hurt Brown’s job-approval rating, said Mark DiCamillo, director of The Field Poll, adding that “as long as the governor is seen as taking some actions – and the party is seen as moving and providing some leadership – I think it doesn’t necessarily work against them.”

But there is precedent for concern. President George W. Bush was stung by his handling of Hurricane Katrina, Gov. Gray Davis by the energy crisis.

“If this is just the tip of the iceberg and the problems become even more severe, I think all bets are off,” DiCamillo said. “Right now, the public isn’t reacting in any discernible way against the majority party because of the drought.”

But Democrats are sensitive to the possibility. In a speech to delegates on Saturday, state Controller Betty Yee said “the drought and severely reduced water supplies (are) becoming the new normal,” and she lamented the effects of the drought on “our neighbors in the smaller, rural areas” of the state.

People facing water shortages, she said, “are relying on us to conserve more to help them.”

Brown has labored to draw attention to his handling of the crisis, traveling to a dry meadow in the Sierra Nevada to announce his water reduction order and inviting reporters to observe him meeting with affected industries.

The water bond that Brown championed and voters approved last year includes \$2.7 billion for storage projects such as dams and reservoirs, but Republicans have criticized the pace of project approvals.

Brown said in March that “these are big projects, and I’m certainly looking very carefully at how we can get more storage as quickly as possible.”

Senate Democrats – also eager to appear engaged – released a letter urging Brown to take additional actions on the drought last month, while Kamala Harris, the state attorney general and a U.S. Senate candidate, used the water crisis to push back against Republicans skeptical of climate change.

“Are you kidding me?” she told convention delegates on Saturday. “With the worst drought in history, what more evidence do they need?”

A December report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration attributed the drought primarily to natural – not man-made – causes, though rising temperatures have likely exacerbated its effects.

Rob Stutzman, a Republican strategist, said the Democratic Party is probably “a year away from real political problems.” Democrats hold such a large advantage in statewide contests that the party is unlikely to suffer broadly, Stutzman said, but the effect could be significant in contested congressional and legislative races.

If the state remains dry over the winter, Republicans expect to feature the drought heavily in campaigns. Republican Assemblywoman Shannon Grove, a vocal critic of Democratic policies on water, complained about an unsuccessful GOP-backed bill designed to streamline environmental review for the Sites Reservoir in the Sacramento Valley and Temperance Flat on the San Joaquin River.

The language was crafted to resemble an effort last year backed by powerful Democrats to speed construction of the Sacramento Kings basketball arena.

“That would make a great mailer,” Grove said. “You could exempt the Kings arena to play basketball from (environmental quality laws), but you can’t exempt water storage? We can live without basketball. But we can’t live without water.”

Dave Gilliard, a Republican who works on congressional and legislative campaigns, said GOP candidates next year will promote the idea that Democrats “are out to punish suburbia and rural California” with their drought-related policies.

Democrats in targeted House and legislative races in the Central Valley and Inland Empire, he said, “are going to be put on the spot to answer for the government leadership they are part of.”

Mark Baldassare, president of the Public Policy Institute of California, said it will be hard for Republicans to lay blame on Democrats when the public generally associates the drought not with one political party, but with the lack of rain.

“It’s hard to blame the people in office for that,” he said.

However, politicians can suffer consequences of public unrest even if they are not chiefly responsible for the cause.

Economic downturns, for example, tend to depress the job-approval ratings of incumbents.

“People are asked to make sacrifices, they’re not happy about something – it can affect the way people think about leadership, whether it’s the economy, the budget or some other sort of scarcity or discomfort,” Baldassare said.

He said the drought could rise to that level, “but I don’t know. I haven’t seen that yet.”

David Siders: [\(916\) 321-1215](tel:(916)321-1215), [@davidsiders](https://www.instagram.com/davidsiders)