

California's water strategy deserves an open debate and real solutions

By Jared Huffman Special to The Bee

In response to the worst drought in our state's long memory, our public institutions – with one unfortunate exception – are stepping up.

Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature passed long-overdue groundwater and sustainable water investments through last year's \$7.5 billion water bond. Local governments and water districts are launching conservation plans to preserve dwindling water supplies. The Obama administration is providing millions in emergency grants to drought-stricken communities and farmers.

Rep. Jared Huffman | U.S. House Office of Photography

But even though natural disasters typically garner bipartisan congressional responses, House Republicans have treated the drought as a political opportunity instead of a moral imperative. They've dusted off the same political agenda they've pursued for years – weakening environmental laws, gutting fishery protections and redirecting water needed by other regions – and tried to sell it as a drought response.

California deserves better than the predictable “blame the fish” carnival. We cannot condemn “inconvenient” salmon runs to extinction, pre-empt state water rights, or declare winners and losers among the state's drought-stricken regions.

That's why I developed the kind of serious, comprehensive legislation this crisis demands.

Right now, that means providing emergency funding to stretch existing water supplies: deploying efficient irrigation technology, drilling wells and building pipelines. It also means helping out-of-work farmworkers and combating upstream water theft on federal lands. We need to act – right now.

Our long-term needs are even greater. Scientists warn we're likely to experience more frequent and severe droughts due to climate change, stressing our environment and straining water supplies. We must become more drought resilient, and we can start with our chronically underfunded clean-water infrastructure. By fully funding existing programs, we can quickly upgrade treatment facilities, repair leaking pipes, and improve urban and agricultural water use efficiency. We need to rethink how we manage headwater forests and watersheds and recharge depleted groundwater aquifers.

California – the home of innovation – should be using cutting-edge drought responses. The Army Corps of Engineers needs to join the 21st century and operate reservoirs based on the latest science and satellite forecasts, not crude flood predictions from 1960s-era manuals. We need major federal investments to clean up contaminated aquifers, improve desalination technology and dramatically expand water recycling.

We also need to plan for the worst.



We call in the National Guard when floods overwhelm a state, but when communities run dry, we have no plans to deploy military resources – including mobile desalination technology. Disaster response agencies should start planning for the worst right now. Fisheries managers should prepare, too, for years of warmer, depleted streams. We can't just keep lurching from one crisis to the next.

My bill reflects four basic principles that should guide Congress in responding to this and future droughts:

1. Do no harm. Ours is a complex system, and we should not redirect impacts or micromanage it from Washington.
2. No water wars. End attempts to gut environmental laws and take water from other regions. Solutions must respect environmental and water quality laws, and benefit every region impacted by this drought.
3. Think long-term. We should respond not just to the immediate crisis but build drought resiliency for the future.
4. Process matters. Successful water initiatives require transparency, inclusiveness and deliberation. Backroom deals and secret water grabs invariably create more problems than they solve.

I've been reaching out to stakeholders, economists, farmers, conservationists and California's top water managers to make my bill the best it can be. Before I formally introduce it, I'd like you to join them in giving your feedback. Please visit Huffman.house.gov/drought to read this draft legislation.

Our water future deserves an open debate leading to real solutions. I'll hope you'll join in.

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