

# California drought resurrects old population growth concerns

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Earlier this month, with his East Bay community facing the prospect of losing its only source of water, Edwin Pattison appeared before residents at a town hall meeting and lamented the strain of California's growing population on dwindling water supplies.

"When you increase a population significantly," said Pattison, general manager of the Mountain House Community Services District, "you reach a point of what's called 'demand hardening,' and you cannot conserve your way out of a situation where there's just too many people and overcommitment of demand across the spectrum."

The following week, the Victorville Daily Press in Southern California focused its attention on a planned housing development in Hesperia, ruminating under the headline, "Is there enough water for Tapestry?" At a forum in Los Angeles, Austin Beutner, publisher of the Los Angeles Times, asked Gov. Jerry Brown, "Have we reached a limit on growth and population?"

With the state in its fourth year of drought, population growth – an issue that receded from public debate in recent years – appears resurgent in California's consciousness. And like the value of an almond or the luxury of a front lawn, which exposed rifts between urban and rural sensibilities in this state, the number of people living here has provided a platform for division, too.

In a headline-grabbing television ad last month, a group called Californians for Population Stabilization blamed immigration for the state's lack of water.

"If Californians are having fewer children, why isn't there enough water?" a young boy asks the camera.

A narrator offers this explanation, followed by an appeal: "Virtually all of California's population growth is from immigration. Let's slow immigration and save some California for tomorrow."

Joe Guzzardi, a spokesman for CAPS, said the ad aired in Los Angeles and Sacramento. The buy was relatively small – Guzzardi would only put it in the "low six figures" – a level intended to generate media attention more than television viewership.

For population growth "from immigration," CAPS counted not only immigrants, but the U.S.-born children of immigrants, who are citizens. But the ad served its purpose.

"The ads generated a lot of controversy," Guzzardi said. "We're interested in furthering people's awareness in California of what's going on."

The state Department of Finance projects that California will grow from about 39 million people now to more than 51 million by 2060. Though the state's growth rate is relatively slow, the Public Policy Institute of California said in a brief in February that as the population expands, California will shoulder "increased demand in all areas of infrastructure and public services – including education, transportation, corrections, housing, water, health and welfare."

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But concern about growth runs counter to demographers' greater worry: Not that California is growing too fast, but that its population is growing too slowly.

“It’s totally the wrong question,” said Dowell Myers, a University of Southern California demography professor. “Without immigrants, California would be dead as a doornail. We don’t have enough children right now as it is to replace the workforce and the tax base ... when Californians retire.”

Myers attributes fear of population growth to a mindset formed in the 1980s, when population grew rapidly. He said “a lot of people’s attitudes about immigration ... stem from that period” and are now “behind the times.”

Brown, who governed California before from 1975 to 1983, has expressed concern about growth’s impact, saying in Los Angeles that “we run up against certain limits.”

However, Brown said, “We can accommodate more people. I believe we can certainly take another 10 million, but we have to do it in a different way.”

He said Californians must “find a more elegant way of relating to material things, and you have to use them with great sensitivity and sophistication.”

Heather Cooley, water program director at the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based nonprofit research group, put it in plainer terms. The challenge highlighted by the drought, she said, is not how many people live in California, but “how we develop, and the reality is we can be developing a lot better.”

She said local agencies, which have long considered transportation and environmental impacts of development, could “do a much better job of understanding how many people should live in a particular area” given water availability.

Still, California has made gains in conservation, storage and water recycling efforts. In densely populated areas, water use per person has declined in recent years. In Southern California, where most of the state’s population lives, total water consumption has remained flat over the past 15 years, despite population growth.

The experience of water conservation efforts in other countries suggests California could survive on far less water.

“You could basically double California’s population if we use the same per capita urban water use as Spain,” said Jay Lund, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at UC Davis. “To me, there’s really no serious basis for population discussions on the basis of water.”

An array of groups, with causes ranging from immigration to religion and the environment, have long raised concerns about global population growth, and the issue gained widespread attention in California in the 1980s.

Soon after taking office in 1991, Gov. Pete Wilson created a council of Cabinet-level agencies to study population growth statewide.

“We must shape our future, not suffer it,” Wilson said at the start of his second year in office, in his State of the State address.

Then recession gripped the state, growth slowed, and concern about overcrowding dissipated.

“Unfortunately, the bottom fell out of the state economy, and so attention was diverted elsewhere,” said Richard Sybert, who was director of Wilson’s office of planning and research.

He said the administration was seeking to manage the state’s growth, and “we never entertained for a moment the notion that we could limit population.”

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“The notion that there’s too many people here is frankly absurd,” he said. “It’s frankly not borne out by the numbers ... You could halve the population here – say we have 20 million instead of 40 million – and there would still be a drought.”

Ellen Hanak, a water expert at the Public Policy Institute of California, noted that “hot spots” in the drought have not been in the population centers of Los Angeles or San Francisco, but in relatively isolated rural communities “where the issues really are infrastructure, and not just that there’s no water available in a generic sense.”

The heaviest users of water in California are not city dwellers, but agriculture. The industry accounts for roughly 80 percent of all water used by people in the state.

Gregory Weber, executive director of the California Urban Water Conservation Council, said it is possible that water use will shift slightly from farm to urban uses in some areas as the state’s population grows. Last week, Mountain House reached agreement to buy water from the South San Joaquin Irrigation District.

When that agency formed more than 100 years ago, it primarily provided water to farmers. But it has since expanded to provide domestic service.

“I think there’s plenty of room for California to grow,” Weber said. “How it should grow, how big it should grow, these are I think some of the major pressing questions that are facing the state today.”

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