

# Halting housing construction is no answer to California's drought

By The Editorial Board , LA Daily News



Sprawl, as such, is not the cause of California's water restrictions in the drought. (Staff photo by Leo Jarzomb)

Perhaps it's human nature, when a person is concerned about one big problem, to apply answers to entirely other problems through the filter of the main concern.

That is certainly what many Southern Californians concerned about excess population growth are doing when it comes to the West's ongoing drought.

Here we are, they say, after four dry rainy seasons, with the governor imposing restrictions on everyone in the state — residential and commercial, agricultural and recreational — aimed at cutting back by 25 percent, and still we are allowing the building of new homes and businesses!

They say it in the grocery-store lines, around the office ... well, water cooler, and in many different ways in their letters to the editor.

The two-facedness, say our fellow Californians, is simply outrageous. They see a complete disconnect between a government that on the one hand is enforcing the strictest cutbacks ever in how much water we have access to and on the other refuses to simply put a moratorium on building permits. So long as the state continues to run dry, they say, how can we add more construction that seems to put up a welcome sign aimed at adding more users of water to the 40 million people here already?

The concern is understandable, and yet, as with many such common wisdoms, it is wrong, when viewed as part of

the state's true water-use picture. Residential water use is a drop in the bucket. Not that it would be a very good idea at all, but if we covered most of the state's vast open spaces with homes instead of growing agricultural hay, we'd use less water than we do now.

The rest of the nation has always been interested in most things Californian, and The New Yorker's staff writer in Los Angeles, Dana Goodyear, recently contributed [an extraordinary piece on the dying Salton Sea](#) vis a vis our drought. In it, she noted that in order to save the state-mandated million and a half acre feet of water a year, Californians must forgo "long showers, frequent laundering, toilet-flushing, gardening, golf." Letter-writer Thomas Sittler of Foster City in the Bay Area [responded](#) by noting that California alfalfa-growing alone — much of which is exported to China and the Mideast to feed their cattle — uses 5.2 million acre feet a year, "or the equivalent of about a hundred billion showers."

A hundred billion? That ain't hay. So, clearly, building new condominiums, in relative terms, has almost nothing to do with the water-supply problem in California.

Slow-growth and population-control advocates need to instead sustain their arguments on their own merits rather than by bringing water into the picture. Especially in terms of suburban sprawl in Southern California, with its deleterious effects on freeway gridlock, air quality and workers' time with their families, the case can be made that we need to stop expanding our megalopolis.

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But our cities need more housing, not less, as part of the solution to the supply-and-demand economics that has made houses and apartments unaffordable to too many of us, and to help solve the tragedy of tens of thousands sleeping on the streets each night. Smart growth — more multi-family, closer to transit — rather than no growth is still the best policy for California as we await some blessed rain.

**About the Author**