

As lakes drain, we must rethink water

By the Editorial
Board

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials, who operate the Central Valley Project, relied on a faulty gauge in April and overestimated the amount of cold water behind Shasta Dam.

That error might seem trivial, but not in this fourth parched year of the drought. It is now cascading throughout the water system, making clearer than ever that Californians must rethink how water is used.

Federal and state officials are compensating for the “instrument calibration error” by drastically reducing the amount of Shasta water being released into the Sacramento River. The goal is to hold remaining cold water in California’s largest reservoir until the fall, so at least some salmon will spawn.

Cutting Shasta flows is, in turn, forcing water system operators to [open spigots at Lake Oroville and Folsom Lake](#). That release protects local crops and water quality for the Central Valley and Southern California by preventing salt water from flowing too far into the Delta.

But by the end of this summer, Folsom reservoir, which holds 977,000 acre-feet, is expected to fall to 120,000 acre-feet, below last year’s historic low. Oroville, which holds 3.5 million acre-feet, will be at a quarter of its capacity.

Water system operators guarantee that public health and safety will remain paramount. But with summer barely underway, representatives of the 500,000 suburban Sacramento residents relying on Folsom Lake water aren’t so sanguine.

“We could be in danger if there is a miscalculation on the part of people who control the releases, and we’re extraordinarily concerned about that,” Folsom City Manager Evert Palmer said in an interview.

Meanwhile, to the south, the 2,500 landowners in the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Water Authority have fallowed more land this year than ever before, 40,000 acres. The authority is made up of four irrigation districts encompassing 240,000 acres in Fresno, Madera, Merced and Stanislaus counties. They planted crops based on a Bureau of Reclamation commitment that they’d receive 350,000 acre-feet of water this year, 40 percent of what would be a full allocation.

July is when the need to irrigate is greatest. But water system operators cannot transport water south of the Delta if they hope to preserve what remains of the Delta ecosystem. That leaves farmers who planted annual crops with an unhappy choice: further deplete aquifers by pumping groundwater, or let crops shrivel.

Farmers can skip a year of planting tomatoes or alfalfa, or even lose an annual crop and rebound next season. But many have made decisions that have hardened water demand.

California’s role as leading farm state must be protected, but water use must be rethought

In 2010, the San Joaquin River authority counted 23,962 acres planted in high-value fruit, nuts and vines. That was a 190 percent increase in permanent crops from 1995, the authority said.

Now, 45,000 acres are planted in permanent crops, primarily almonds, walnuts, pistachios and pomegranates, Steve Chedester, the authority’s executive director, told a Sacramento Bee editorial board member. Without Central Valley Project water, growers will tap groundwater to save their trees.

California’s place as the producer of the [nation’s fresh fruit, vegetables and nuts must be protected](#). But the system of

water rights is flawed, as San Joaquin River authority farmers could attest. The authority has rights dating to before the turn of the 20th century, when California had fewer than 1.5 million residents.

With nearly 40 million of us now, competition for water will intensify, which should prompt farmers and policymakers to answer tough questions about where crops are planted, and how much water farmers can realistically expect.

Gov. Jerry Brown's emergency orders to curtail water use don't urge a building moratorium. Nor do we. But state and local leaders need to ensure that [development doesn't occur without water availability](#).

Five years ago, before the drought, the city of [Folsom submitted an urban water management plan](#) to the state Department of Water Resources, as is required by law. Like most municipalities, Folsom anticipated population growth. In its report, the city anticipated that water supply would remain flat, despite expected growth from 61,000 people in 2010 to 80,000 in 2020 and 105,000 in 2035.

[Folsom is on a crash water diet](#), but also is intent on adding 10,000 housing units south of Highway 50 in the coming years. It's not unique. Growth is planned in Sacramento, Natomas and across the state.

As population grows, California must do a better job of capturing runoff when rain falls. The state needs more storage, beneath the ground and possibly in a surface reservoir. The cheapest water is that which isn't used; reuse and conservation are vital.

In this drought, water managers have no room for error. But gauges break. That mistake could turn out for the good, but only if it forces a more clear-eyed assessment of California's future.