

John Laird and Henry T. Perea: California Water Fix is vital to Central Valley

By John Laird and Henry T. Perea

The drought has hit every part of California hard, but the Central Valley has been particularly devastated. A recent Fresno Bee article detailed the tragic case of East Porterville residents whose wells have run dry and taps stopped delivering water. Farmers and farm workers have had their life's work run out as family farms throughout the region have been forced to fallow fields for lack of a reliable water supply and have struggled to put food on the table.

The human and economic toll of our region's lack of reliable water is devastating. It should serve as a wake-up call to move forward with critical investments in the state water distribution system that provides a significant portion of our water here in Fresno County and the entire Central Valley.

1 of 2

John Laird, left, secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency, records figures collected by Frank Gehrke, chief of snow surveys, near Echo Summit in January 2013. Randy Pench rpench@sacbee.com

Governor Brown's administration does not want the drought to take our attention off the long-term water picture, particularly since future droughts are going to be more frequent. The California Water Action Plan – issued by the administration last year – is a road map to sustainability through many different actions, including storage, conservation, recycling and increased efficiency.

Proposition 1, the \$7.5 billion bond measure approved by over two-thirds of voters last fall, was based on this action plan and placed support for the “all of the above” strategy that will bring California closer to future water sustainability.

Part of that water action plan is to upgrade California's failing water distribution system through a renewed approach called California Water Fix –formerly the Bay Delta Conservation Plan. This plan would meet the dual goals of water reliability and habitat restoration in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The Central Valley relies heavily on water that flows from the Sierra Nevada through a system of aging levees, pipes and canals to our region. Some parts of the Central Valley receive up to 90 percent of local water supplies from this system.

Yet crumbling dirt levees and environmental damage have created a fragile choke point in our state's main water distribution system south of Sacramento. Because of these problems, water to our region has been significantly cut back in recent years – costing billions of dollars in economic losses and forcing family farmers to plow under fields and lay off workers.

The governor's revised approach includes a parallel “California Eco Restore” plan which aims to stabilize the delta's vulnerable ecosystem by restoring 30,000 acres of wildlife habitat and restoring more natural water flows that will help fish species. This, in turn, will minimize the environmental conflicts that stop water flowing to our communities.

The failure to upgrade our state's main water distribution system also has resulted in an inability to capture and transfer water during wet years. To endure severe drought, like we've experienced over the past four years, we need as much stored water as possible.

The California Water Fix will address the long-term security of our local water supplies by delivering water through

dual tunnels, rather than relying solely on today's old, deteriorating system. This infrastructure will allow us to more efficiently move, capture and store water during wet years like we hope to experience next year, so we have more supply to help us get through the dry years. The plan will also modernize our water delivery system to better protect against earthquakes and natural disasters.

The governor's revised approach includes a parallel "California Eco Restore" plan which aims to stabilize the delta's vulnerable ecosystem by restoring 30,000 acres of wildlife habitat and restoring more natural water flows that will help fish species. This, in turn, will minimize the environmental conflicts that stop water flowing to our communities.

The Department of Water Resources recently released an updated Environmental Impact Report (EIR) on this plan, and is seeking further public comment. The revised approach reflects the thousands of pages of comments by citizens and stakeholders, as well as local, state and federal agencies, and is intended to chart the best path forward for project completion.

The California Water Fix has been reviewed, studied and amended for nearly 10 years by the state's water experts, federal agencies and a broad group of citizens and interest groups. It is the only viable plan to secure our state's aging and outdated water distribution system.

We simply cannot afford to wait any longer to create a reliable water supply for the Central Valley. Residents in our community and throughout the state should rally together and support Gov. Brown's California Water Fix. Our preparation for future droughts depends on it.

John Laird is California Secretary for Natural Resources. Henry T. Perea of Fresno represents the 31st District in the Assembly.