

California desperately needs new surface storage

By Aubrey Bettencourt Special to The Bee

Californians deserve rational and complete answers to their questions: Why has our state failed to initiate a meaningful response to not just one or two, but three catastrophic droughts we've experienced over the last 45 years?

California simply needs more water. Its people, fish, wildlife, food producers and others – all have been harmed by delays in our response to periodic droughts and climate change. What was an inconvenience in 1973 and a severe shortfall in the 1980s became an economy-stopping, public-health-threatening assault on our state's residents in 2012-15.

Aubrey Bettencourt

In his commentary, "Nostalgia, not facts, drives Congress' drought proposals" (Forum, April 17), Matt Weiser calls building dams and tinkering with the federal bureaucracy's regulations under the Endangered Species Act "radioactive options." He calls instead for groundwater recharge, water conservation on farms, stormwater capture and wastewater recycling.

From 2000 to 2014, Californians have passed \$27.1 billion in water project bond measures, some funding projects he claims we still need. Another 33 percent was earmarked to ecosystems enhancements. Of the total, only \$2.7 billion – 10 percent – can lay claim to funding water storage projects.

We have 50-year-old regulations with 21st century problems. Structural defects in the federal Reclamation Act and Endangered Species Act were starkly revealed during the current drought. Reclamation isn't permitted to consider building new facilities, only maintain its existing ones.

Had Sites reservoir been online during 2014-15, Shasta, Trinity and Oroville reservoirs would have held enough cold water to chill the Sacramento River and avoid killing 95 percent or more of its spawning salmon and their offspring.

Had a Temperance Flat reservoir been available, spring and summer flows down a restored San Joaquin River would have carried steelhead downriver and pushed salt water, salmon smolt and Delta smelt back to sea, minimizing water quality problems and preventing the salmon and smelt from swimming toward export pumping stations.

California's water system desperately needs new surface storage to operationally balance demands for ecological water use with the needs of California's cities, farms and even the wildlife refuges that depend on water imports. That means we need new federal legislation with provisions that Weiser finds radioactive, but many thoughtful and caring Californians deem essential.

Aubrey Bettencourt is the executive director of the California Water Alliance, a statewide water policy nonprofit. Contact her at aubrey@californiawateralliance.org.

