



“Co-equal” Goals of Water Reliability and Delta Protection Deserve More than Lip Service



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Somewhere on the road to achieving the “co-equal goals” of a reliable water supply and the enhancement and protection of the Delta, the reliable part was left behind. Federal and state policymakers should look to restore that balance and provide California communities with more certainty about their water supply. And, let’s make the changes now when we have water so the system is fixed for the drier years.

The goal of water reliability goes back at least 50 years, when President Kennedy praised Governor Pat Brown for his leadership on the Central Valley Project toward the “great cause of making water available to the people of this State.” The goal was reaffirmed in 1998 by U.S. Secretary of Interior Bruce Babbitt, who proposed a solution “to serve the needs of a big and growing state, simultaneously improving water quality and keeping enough volume in the delta to repair an ecosystem so starved for water in the past it has been in danger of collapse.”

In early 2000, the State of California weighed in: the Department of Water Resources warned, “The lack of a reliable water supply that results in shortages of water would have a devastating effect on the economy of California and the health and welfare of its citizens, as well as the ecosystem of the Delta.” And, in 2009, Governor Brown signed into the law the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Reform Act stressing the co-equal goals of ecosystem restoration and water supply in calling for a modernized water infrastructure.

But despite clear evidence of economic and social benefits to the state, policy decisions regarding the Delta and groundwater management have shortchanged reliability. In many instances, California is proceeding on the path of conservation and environmental protection without factoring in its co-equal goal.

The importance of that goal – reliability – has been affirmed by the state’s residents. A 2016 poll found that 62 percent of Californians would be willing to pay more for water if the funds were

used to improve water supply reliability. It is the desire and the mandate of Californians that their government ensure an adequate supply of water for every community.

As we move forward with water policy, California needs a more comprehensive approach that considers both short- and long terms goals for a balanced policy. For every program that favors environmental priorities, our elected representatives need to develop a program to guarantee supply reliability.

Case in point: The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) was passed to require local agencies to develop a plan for sustainable management of groundwater. But when asked about the potential impact of the Act, officials representing the California Resources Agency suggested that two million acres of farmland could be taken out of production – which will in effect devastate family farms throughout California. SGMA must be co-joined with policies that remain faithful to the co-equal goals to protect those two million acres from devastation.

For more than 50 years, water supply reliability was a primary goal for California. Now the state's supply is threatened by regulations and court decisions limiting water delivery and groundwater use. The new State Legislature and Congress have a responsibility to pursue water reliability solutions, including reforms to existing laws that have restricted water supplies and new laws to better manage our resources to achieve the co-equal goals.

Policies that balance co-equal goals are the job of our legislative bodies. Now we must fulfill our historic promise and add our present water policy to that list. By prioritizing supply reliability with environmental protections, our elected leaders can produce policies with co-equal benefits.

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