

NEWS CLIPS

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Resource Conservation and Public Outreach

Organized by date

Oxnard unveils levee options

River project may be finished by end of 2018

By Gretchen Wenner
Ventura County Star 6/06/2014

The fix for a deficient levee system in north Oxnard is taking shape and will mean visible changes on Ventura Road south of Highway 101.

At stake is adequate flood protection for about 3,800 structures as well as a way for some homeowners to avoid mandatory flood insurance.

Neighborhoods affected by the project stretch from the Wagon Wheel development west to Victoria Avenue on the south side of the Santa Clara River. The South Bank, Orchard, Sierra Linda, Windsor North, River Ridge and Victoria Estates neighborhoods are protected by the system, along with the River Ridge Golf Club.

A meeting Wednesday evening on upgrade alternatives drew about 70 residents. They looked over maps and heard a presentation on project options, funding status and construction timelines. They also were asked to give feedback on preferred alternatives.

The complex project, known as SCR-3, is being considered in two main pieces.

One stretch includes the so-called gap, a 2,500-foot span south of Highway 101 without flood protection.

The second section continues downstream, where three existing levees need improvements to meet federal standards.

A variety of options puts the cost for both sections at \$13.5 million to \$25.5 million, according to the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, the county agency overseeing the effort.

Existing funds can cover most of the project at the lower end of the cost scale, agency officials said. But there is an \$8.4 million shortfall if the most expensive alternatives are chosen.

Whatever happens, scenery on Ventura Road near the gap is scheduled to change, as all four alternatives require a concrete floodwall along the road. One alternative would put a 6-foot wall on the river side of the road, blocking the view and requiring tree removal.

The three other alternatives would include a concrete wall on the opposite side of the street.

The SCR-3 project is one of the levee upgrades planned around Ventura County meant to bring the structures up to federal standards. The improvements mean the levees would provide protection in so-called 100-year floods, now called "1 percent annual chance" events.

With the Federal Emergency Management Agency redrawing floodplain maps, the watershed district hopes to have the SCR-3 fixes in place in time to avoid mandatory flood insurance for those with federally backed mortgages.

If all goes smoothly, the project would be finished by the end of 2018.

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Poll finds little support for drought spending despite broad awareness



San Gabriel Dam operators measure the decreasing depth of the San Gabriel Reservoir in February. (Don Bartletti / Los Angeles Times)

The state's residents cite a broad range of causes for the drought, ranging from a lack of rain and snow and people using too much water to insufficient storage and climate change.

BETTINA BOXALL

LA TIMES 6/06/2014

Of 11 different drought solutions, easing environmental rules was the only one opposed by more than 50%

Pollster on California drought survey: "As soon as you inject spending into it, support dries up"

Most Californians surveyed say the statewide drought has had little or no impact on their daily lives, and a majority oppose the suspension of environmental protections or large-scale public spending to boost water supplies, a new USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll has found.

Although 89% characterize the drought as a major problem or crisis, only 16% say it has personally affected them to a major degree.

Despite widespread news coverage of the drought — one of the worst in recent decades — the state's major population centers have largely escaped severe mandatory rationing. Even agriculture, which as California's thirstiest sector is inevitably hit the hardest by drought, has partially compensated for reduced water delivery by pumping more groundwater.

That has softened the drought's effect on many, apparently blunting the desire for drastic remedies and big spending on water projects.

While Central Valley congressmen and some agribusiness interests have blamed environmental regulations for worsening the water shortages, those polled cited a much broader range of causes. Topping the list was a lack of rain and snow and people using too much water, followed by insufficient storage and climate change.

"They're really blaming larger forces here," said David Kanevsky of American Viewpoint, the Republican firm that conducted the opinion survey with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, a Democratic firm. "What they don't want to see is quick fixes at the expense of the environment."

The survey showed strong support for water recycling, capturing storm water, increasing storage in underground aquifers, voluntary conservation and seawater desalination. A smaller percentage, though still a majority, favored building new dams and reservoirs.

But when it comes to paying for the projects, the numbers flipped. Only 36% want to improve storage and delivery systems by spending taxpayer dollars.

"As soon as you inject spending into it, support dries up," said Drew Lieberman of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner.

Pollsters conducted the telephone survey of 1,511 registered California voters from May 21 to May 28 for the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and the Los Angeles Times. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.9 percentage points.

A large majority of those surveyed, 87%, said they were trying to save water by taking shorter showers, flushing toilets less frequently and making other changes in their domestic routines. Two-thirds say they are watering their lawns less, and roughly a quarter say they've ripped out lawns and replaced them with drought-tolerant plants.

Generally speaking, people in all parts of the state were taking steps to reduce domestic water use. But regional differences surfaced when people were queried about solutions.

Coastal areas favored mandatory 20% cuts in water use more than inland regions. In Southern California, 45% of those surveyed said water rates should be increased to

promote conservation, compared with 56% in the Bay Area and slightly less than a third in the Central Valley.

"If they have to raise the price of water ... I think it will encourage people to use less of it," said Erika Hart, 23, a college student who lives in an apartment in Fontana.

A biology major with independent political leanings, Hart also opposed suspending environmental regulations. "I believe we should do more as a community to limit our water usage before we go and affect the wildlife around us," she said.

The Bay Area had the smallest share of those saying the drought had a major impact — 11% — probably reflecting an urban landscape with some of the lowest per capita water use in the state. But 32% of those in the Central Valley, the state's agricultural heart, said the drought had a major effect on their lives.

A sharp partisan divide surfaced over the role of climate change, with 78% of Democrats saying it was very or somewhat responsible for water supply problems, compared with 44% of Republicans.

"I don't believe in climate change," said Republican Steve Bennett, 60, a contractor who lives in Martinez. "This is a semiarid state. I don't know when it's going to sink in — but we have real wet winters and then we have dry periods, and it's been that way forever."

Democrats and Republicans differed to a lesser extent on whether environmental protections for fish and wildlife should be suspended in response to water shortages. Overall, 55% of voters said no, as did 56% of Democrats, compared with 45% of Republicans and 64% of those who didn't align with a party.

Those results suggest a bill passed by the GOP-controlled U.S. House and headed to a House-Senate conference committee is out of sync with a majority of the state's voters. The legislation would roll back federal fish protections to increase delivery of water in California. But of 11 different water-supply solutions in the opinion survey, easing environmental regulations was the only one opposed by more than 50%.

Photos and newscasts about shrinking reservoirs and dusty cropland have also apparently failed to boost voter willingness to open the public wallet for water projects.

Reluctance to spend taxpayer dollars on water supply was found across the political spectrum. Whether Democratic, Republican or independent, fewer than 40% of those surveyed supported storage and delivery system improvements if they cost taxpayer money.

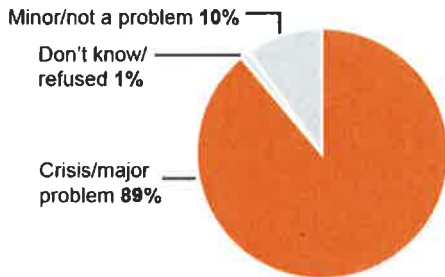
The numbers are largely unchanged from the results of a USC-Times poll conducted in September that gauged support for state borrowing to finance water-supply improvements. Legislators are now trying to hammer out a water bond to place on the November ballot.

"I think it's trouble for passing a water bond," Lieberman said, "if the 'no' side spends money" this fall.

Water shortage

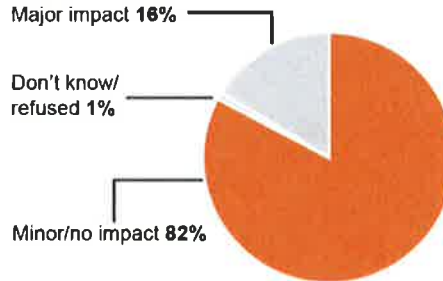
Among registered voters:

Q: Would you say the drought in California is a crisis, a major problem but not a crisis, a minor problem or not a problem at all?



Note: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.
Source: USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll

Q: How much of an impact has the current drought in California had on you and your family on a daily basis?



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Nonnative mule deer now in Catalina Island Conservancy's cross-hairs



A mule deer forages on Santa Catalina Island. The deer -- whose population now stands at about 2,400 -- is the most destructive invasive species left on the island. (Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

LOUIS SAHAGUN

LA TIMES 6/06/2014

HuntingBiology

The mule deer is the most destructive invasive species left on Catalina Island

Drought is forcing mule deer to take even bigger bite out of unique vegetation

Conservancy will require that more does than bucks are taken during hunting season

Over the last two decades, the conservancy that owns nine-tenths of this island has shot, trapped and shipped out thousands of goats, pigs and bison that were literally eating away the island.

Today, three female goats and a single shaggy pig remain in the rugged interior. The bison population has dropped from 350 to 138, and the remaining animals are on birth control.

Now, nonnative mule deer are in the cross-hairs.



Calvin Duncan, a wildlife biologist for the Catalina Island Conservancy, collects a bison fecal sample to check for the likelihood of female fertility. The island's bison population has dropped from 350 to 138, and the remaining animals are on birth control. (Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

The mule deer — whose population now stands at about 2,400 — is the most destructive invasive species left on the island, situated 22 miles south of Palos Verdes Peninsula. Prolonged drought is forcing them to take an even bigger bite out of the region's unique vegetation.

This year, for the first time, the Catalina Island Conservancy will require that more does than bucks are taken during hunting season, which runs from July into December.

"This year, 60% of the 500 tags we issue will be for does," John Mack, the conservancy's conservation manager, said during a tour of mountainous terrain that deer had stripped of brush and saplings, leaving dry tufts of grass. "Since each doe annually produces twins, tagging one means you've removed three deer from the island that year."

The response of shrubs to the thinned deer herds will determine whether the hunting ratio will be modified in subsequent seasons. "I think we may eventually have to go to an 80% doe-heavy harvest to reduce the population," Mack said.

The new hunting strategy is being pursued under an agreement between the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, which owns the deer, and the nonprofit conservancy, which owns 88% of the island and is mandated to return it to its natural state.

"If nothing is done, that deer population will grow to the point where much of it will starve to death," department biologist Rebecca Barboza said.

Typically, hunters take about 350 deer a year. Biologists say that's not nearly enough. Reports of deer feasting on home gardens and parading down Avalon streets have soared in recent weeks.



Mule deer eat lettuce at the site where feral cats are also fed near Avalon's Descanso Beach Club. Nearby is a sign warning that feeding deer is "illegal and dangerous."
(Bob Chamberlin / Los Angeles Times)

About 20 deer routinely amble out of dry brush near Avalon's swank Descanso Beach Club at dusk and converge on a wooden box filled with bowls of water and pet food. The food, both dry and wet, is meant primarily for feral cats, but some residents who replenish it mistakenly believe that it also helps deer.

Biologists say that isn't true. Deer like the salt found in cat food, but it lacks vitamins and can lead to bloating and fatal digestive disorders in the herbivores, said Julie King, the conservancy's senior biologist.

Occasionally, residents leave mounds of lettuce for the deer at the site, near a sign warning that feeding deer is "illegal and dangerous."

Much of the cat food is put in dishes and slid into an area of the box designed to be inaccessible to deer. But King said scientists "have seen deer lay down on their sides and pull the food dishes out with their hooves."

The first deer were shipped over by the Los Angeles County Forestry Department in the 1930s, about the time pigs were brought from Santa Cruz Island to root out rattlesnakes. Domestic goats were turned loose by Spanish missionaries in the 1820s. Bison were imported for movies in 1924.

With no predators to thin the herds, deer have competed with the island's native wildlife for eight decades, wreaking havoc on plants, some of them found nowhere else.

Now, as the drought drags on, green saplings and chaparral are especially vulnerable to browsing deer—and crucial for the survival of the island's ecosystem. Catalina usually gets about 12 inches of rainfall a year. But in the last 12 months it has received less than 5 inches, Avalon officials said.

Deer pose an acute threat to native plant communities after fires such as one that charred 10% of the island in 2007, according to a recent study led by Aaron Ramirez, a research biologist at UC Berkeley.

Ramirez found "extreme levels of deer browsing" in burned areas of delicate, thornless shrubs and grasses that had evolved in the presence of herbivores no larger than ground squirrels. "Both the deer and bison are causing huge problems," he said.

Conservancy officials would not go that far. But they say Catalina's plants and animals are on the rebound because of the removal of feral creatures, the replanting of native plants nurtured in greenhouses and laboratories, and the fencing off of sensitive areas such as acreage burned during the 2007 fire.

"We can see the light at the end of the tunnel," Mack said. "After a few more threat reductions, we'll be able to focus more attention on large-scale restoration projects such as planting lots and lots of native vegetation on recovering landscapes."

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DROUGHT FACTOIDS

2013 WAS THE **DRIEST YEAR** ON RECORD.

SIERRA **SNOWPACK** **18%** OF NORMAL ON **MAY 1**.

MANY CENTRAL **VALLEY** FARMS **UNABLE TO PLANT** CROPS.

ALMOND, AVOCADO AND CITRUS ORCHARDS **AT RISK**.

Food PRICES EXPECTED TO INCREASE.

SAVING WATER MAKES A DIFFERENCE



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Letters

Beach redux

The Acorn 6/05/2014

Your May 29 article on beach water quality was interesting, but it failed to mention radiation from the March 11, 2011 Fukushima, Japan meltdown.

The article cites the Heal the Bay—a nongovernmental organization— annual beach study, which is principally about bacteria. While its study is well done, it ignores the larger threat from the radioactive water which continues to be released at Fukushima in quantities reportedly as high as 400 metric tons per day. This has been continual for over three years now, with no effective remediation plan.

Your article headline “Report puts local beaches in the clear” may be true technically speaking and limited to bacteria, but is a disservice to readers because it fails to disclose the serious risk from nuclear radiation.

In this age where trust in the government is at historic lows and many news organizations blindly follow White House talking points, it would be refreshing to see appropriate levels of balance in reporting, e.g., adding factual information about radiation as distinguished from simply summarizing an incomplete report.

I really do enjoy *The Acorn* and recognize that it is a community news vehicle, but I ask for more balance, especially in regard to NGOs, federal agencies, the governor’s office, etc.

Doug O’Callaghan

Oak Park

Judge Denies Effort By Homeowner To Block Construction Of Five Million Gallon Water Tank In Westlake Village

Posted on Thursday, June 5, 2014

KCLU <http://www.kclu.org/2014/06/05/judge-denies-effort-by-homeowner-to-block-construction-of-five-million-gallon-water-tank-in-westlake-village/>

A judge denied efforts of a homeowner to stop construction of a water tank near his home in Westlake Village.

The Las Virgenes Municipal Water District is building a five million gallon water tank at Las Virgenes Reservoir.

The homeowner contended the public didn't get the proper opportunity to review the project, and that there are environmental concerns.

But, a Los Angeles Superior Court judge denied the request yesterday, saying the district provided ample opportunity for review, and that no evidence was presented to back claims of environmental issues.

The tank is intended to provide the district with additional storage capacity to deal with the drought, and for use in a major brush fire.

Brown praises Obama climate plan

Power plants would reduce gas emissions

By The Associated Press
Ventura County Star 6/03/2014

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Jerry Brown on Monday welcomed President Barack Obama's global warming initiative, saying it shows the administration is willing to confront climate change.

The Democratic governor highlighted the state's aggressive energy-saving programs, saying they generate billions of dollars in savings and more than a million jobs as a result of clean-energy efforts.

"While others delay and deny, the Obama administration is confronting climate change head-on with these new standards," Brown said in a statement Monday.

He welcomed the White House as a partner, saying, "Bold, sustained action will be required at every level, and this is a major step forward."

Under Obama's proposal, California will have to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from power plants by 23 percent by 2030.

The state already has one of the most ambitious renewable energy standards in the country.

California's Renewable Portfolio Standards program requires one-third of the energy supplied by utilities and power providers to come from renewable sources by 2020.

The Legislature also approved California's landmark global warming law in 2006. It aims to reduce carbon emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, in large part by reducing industrial emissions.

That law already has shaken up the state's industrial sector, costing it more than \$1.5 billion in pollution permit fees.

Brown has described California as being at the "epicenter" of global warming and other climate change, with the state experiencing longer fire seasons, rising sea levels and droughts that threaten agriculture.

While others delay and deny, the Obama administration is confronting climate change head-on with these new standards."

Jerry Brown, *California governor*

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AVALON

Island braces for water rationing

Santa Catalina Island is bracing for water rationing

this summer, and perhaps even more severe restrictions in the fall that could have a devastating effect on its tourism industry.

Starting in July, the island's 2,200 Southern California Edison ratepayers will have to cut water use by 25 percent, or face penalties on their bills, the Los Angeles Times reported Sunday.

Simi agency will increase water rates

Likely jump in bills to range from \$4 to \$28

By Rachel McGrath Special to The Star
Ventura County Star 6/02/2014

Customers who get water from Simi Valley's Waterworks District will see higher rates starting July 15.

The increase will be the first since the introduction of a three-tier billing system and a 20 percent rate raise effective Jan. 1, 2010.

About 70 percent of Simi Valley residents receive water from Ventura County Waterworks District No. 8, and the bimonthly bill increases will range from \$4 to about \$28 depending on amount of water used.

Residents who are customers of Golden State Water Co. will not be affected.

The Simi Valley City Council approved the rate increases in March.

The council approved a joint resolution in May declaring a drought and calling on residents and businesses to voluntarily cut water use 20 percent.

Joe Deakin, assistant director of public works, said Wednesday that the request for the reduction is in addition to the Water Conservation Program Ordinances introduced in 2009. It responds to Gov. Jerry Brown's proclamations of a continued state of emergency ordering more measures to mitigate the effects of drought conditions, he said.

"Ongoing water conservation is required, but it's unclear what the governor is expecting of agencies," Deakin said. "We declared a drought to reinforce that message and that we need to step up our efforts."

Deakin said the city hopes to receive several million dollars of Proposition 84 grants to extend the water recycling system and offset the demand for imported water.

The city's Waterworks District buys water from the Calleguas Municipal Water District, which purchases water from the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. In January the state Department of Water Resources declared that Metropolitan would receive no water from the State Water Project in 2014, although that was later changed to an allocation of 5 percent.

Since 2012, the cost of buying imported water from Calleguas has risen 26.8 percent. While the Waterworks District has absorbed increased costs in 2011 and 2012, its water purchases exceeded its revenue by \$1.4 million in 2013.

The rate increases starting in July are projected to cover a continued shortfall in revenue compared with expenses. Under the terms of the resolution adopted in 2009, the council, acting as the Waterworks District Board, authorized increases for up to five years, with 2014 the last year for such "automatic" increases.

Tier 1 water rates will increase to \$2.58 from \$2.45 per billing unit, which is equivalent to 748 gallons of water. Tier 1 covers up to 36 billing units a month.

For Tier 2, the rate will increase to \$3.09 from \$2.94 per billing unit. It covers use of 37 to 60 billing units per month.

Tier 3 will jump to \$4.02 from \$3.82 per billing unit and encompass homes that use 61 or more billing units a month.

Commercial rates will increase to \$3.06 from \$2.91 per billing unit.

For more information and tips on water conservation, visit <http://www.ci.simivalley.ca.us>. Click on "Departments," then "Public Works," then "Waterworks."

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Environmentalists blame pot farms for dry creeks

Growers say good, bad unfairly linked

By Jason Dearen Associated Press
Ventura County Star 6/02/2014



This May 2013 photo released by the California department of Fish and Wildlife shows a dFW diver counting young salmon and steelhead fish in Humboldt County. Some drought-stricken rivers and streams are allegedly being polluted and sucked dry by marijuana farms. AssociAted Press Photos

SAN FRANCISCO — Some drought-stricken rivers and streams in Northern California's coastal forests are being polluted and sucked dry by water-guzzling medical marijuana farms, wildlife officials say — an issue that has spurred at least one county to try to outlaw personal grows.

State fish and wildlife officials say much of the marijuana being grown in northern counties under the state's medical pot law is not being used for legal, personal use, but for sale in California and states where pot is still illegal.

This demand is fueling backyard and larger-scale pot farming, especially in remote Lake, Humboldt and Mendocino counties on the densely forested North Coast, officials said.

"People are coming in, denuding the hillsides, damming the creeks and mixing in fertilizers that are not allowed in the U.S. into our watersheds," said Denise Rushing, a Lake County supervisor who supports an ordinance essentially banning outdoor grows in populated areas.

"When rains come, it flows downstream into the lake and our water supply," she said.

Many affected waterways also contain endangered salmon, steelhead and other creatures protected by state and federal law.



this 2013 photo shows an environmental scientist holding a dead juvenile Coho salmon found in Little Larabee creek.

Wildlife biologists noticed streams running dry more often during the 18 years since the state passed Proposition 215, but weren't sure why.

"We knew people were diverting water for marijuana operations, but we wanted to know exactly how much," said Scott Bauer, the department biologist who studied the pot farms' effects on four watersheds. "We didn't know they could consume all the water in a stream."

So Bauer turned to Google mapping technology and satellite data to find out where the many gardens are, and how many plants each contained.

His study estimates that about 30,000 pot plants were being grown in each river system — and he estimates that each plant uses about 6 gallons per day over marijuana's 150-day growing season. Some growers and others argue that the 6-gallon estimate is high, and that pot plants can use far less water, depending on size.

He compared that information with government data on stream flows, and visited 32 sites with other biologists to verify the mapping data. He said most grow sites had posted notices identifying them as medical pot farms.

Pot farm pollution has become such a problem in Lake County, south of Bauer's study area, that officials voted unanimously last year to ban outdoor grows.

"Counties are the ultimate arbiter of land use conflict, so while you have a right to grow marijuana for medicinal use, you don't have a right to impinge on someone else's happiness and well-being," Rushing said.

Saying they were being demonized, pot users challenged the law, and gathered enough signatures to place a referendum on the June 3 ballot. They argue that grow restrictions such as the ones being voted on in Lake County lump the responsible users in with criminals.

“We definitely feel environmental issues are a concern. But more restrictive ... ordinances will force people to start growing in unregulated and illegal places on public land,” said Daniel Mc-Clean, a registered nurse and medical marijuana user who opposes the outdoor- grow ban.

While some counties are trying to help regulate the environmental effects of pot farms, Bauer hopes his study will lead to better collaboration with growers to help police illegal use of water and pesticides.

Previous collaborative attempts between government and growers have not ended well, said Anthony Silvaggio, a Humboldt State University sociology professor who studies the pot economy.

“The county or state gets in there and starts doing code enforcement on other things,” Silvaggio said. “They’ve done this in the past” He said pot farmers believe that they are being unfairly blamed for killing endangered salmon while decades of timber cutting and overfishing are the real culprits.

However, the environmental damage has led to a split in the marijuana growing community.

One business, the Tea House Collective in Humboldt County, offers medicinal pot to people with prescriptions that it says is farmed by “small scale, environmentally conscious producers.”

“Patients who cannot grow their own medicine can rely on our farmers to provide them with the best holistic medicine that is naturally grown, sustainable and forever Humboldt,” the group’s website advertises.

Despite efforts of some pot farmers to clean things up, the increased water use by farms is a “full-scale environmental disaster,” said Fish and Wildlife Lt. John Nores, who leads the agency’s Marijuana Enforcement Team.

“Whether it’s grown quasi legally under the state’s medical marijuana laws, or it’s a complete cartel outdoor drug-trafficking grow site, there is extreme environmental damage being done at all levels,” Nores said.

LETTERS

Water agreements

John Snyder, Newbury Park

Re: your May 27 article, "Water usage is not traced": The article is about the failure of the State Water Resources Control Board to monitor usage of free water provided to companies, farms and others because of special claims dating back to the 1800s.

Thomas Howard, executive director of the board, is quoted as saying, "People have made investments based on promises in the existing system. Towns grew up and land was developed based on promises of a secure water supply. Do we strand those investments to start over?"

Putting aside his emotionally- laden use of the word "strand," the answer is yes! The idea that the topic can never be revisited is ridiculous.

Times change; circumstances change. There are many examples of how the refusal to change/update doomed and is still burdening our society.

The steel industry's continued use of antiquated foundry machinery rather than biting the bullet and scrapping and replacing that machinery led to the decline and practical demise of the industry in the U.S.

Our continuing farm subsidy program, originally established to assist relatively small farming businesses, now largely supports large corporations.

Yes, the subject should be re-examined and a more equitable system be put in place. That doesn't mean farming interests, individual or corporate, should be thrown under the bus for the sake of building more housing in urban areas.

It does mean there should be more and better accounting of where our water resources are being directed and how they are being used. The cost may be high, but the cost of not doing so will be even higher down the road.

Avalon bracing for even more severe water restrictions



A bison pauses next to a dried-up branch near the airport on Catalina Island. The island is facing water rationing because of continuing drought, dwindling groundwater and rising tourist demand. (Bob Chamberlin, Los Angeles Times)

LOUIS SAHAGUN

LA TIMES 6/02/2014

Droughts and Heat Waves Water Supply Personal Service Southern California Edison Company

Harbor community of Avalon is bracing for water rationing this summer

Avalon braces for severe water limits in face of drought, dwindling groundwater and rising tourist demand

This harbor community is bracing for water rationing this summer and even more severe restrictions this fall in the face of continuing drought, dwindling groundwater and a rising demand from tourists who are flocking here in numbers not seen since 2000.

Ron Hite, district manager for the island's water utility, Southern California Edison, told the Avalon City Council recently that this is the driest year on the island in 123 years.



Parched fennel plants line a walkway overlooking the crowded boat harbor of Avalon on Catalina Island. Water restrictions could have a devastating effect on a building boom in Avalon spurred by a steady uptick in tourism over the last four years. (Bob Chamberlin, Los Angeles Times)

Edison plans to impose restrictions in July that will call for the island's 2,200 ratepayers to reduce water consumption by 25% or face penalties on their monthly bills. If current trends continue, Edison could be forced to reduce water usage by 50% in November, the utility warned.

If that happens, restaurants may have to serve customers with paper and plastic plates, cups and utensils because they won't have enough water to wash dishes, business leaders say. Hotels may be forced to turn away customers.

The restrictions could have a devastating effect on a building boom in Avalon spurred by a steady uptick in tourism over the last four years. More than half a dozen projects are underway or planned in the two-square-mile community, including a museum, hotel and a spa scheduled to open in July.

With so much at stake, many Avalon officials and business owners are pointing an accusing finger at Edison, which acquired the island's water, gas and electric utility in 1962.



Camila Salas, 21 months, gets a ride on her father Irwin Salas' shoulders as they wait in line with others for samples from an Avalon restaurant. (Bob Chamberlin, Los Angeles Times)

"Our good fortune in having some of the highest visitor counts we've ever seen is not why we are going into serious water rationing in July," said Wayne Griffin, president and chief executive officer of the Catalina Island Chamber of Commerce. "We're going into water rationing because of a terrible drought and because Edison has done very little to increase our water supplies over the past half-century."

Avalon City Councilwoman Cinde MacGugan-Cassidy said the island's population has doubled to 4,000 since 1978 and the visitor count has jumped from 450,000 to 850,000. "What has Edison done to double the amount of water available to Avalon over those years? Not much."

More water is probably on the way, but it is several years away.

The Catalina Island Co., which owns most of the developable land on the 75-square-mile island about 22 miles offshore, plans to fund construction of a new \$2-million well to tap water supplies in bedrock hundreds of feet beneath the city's diminishing reservoir and aquifer supplies.

If tests validate the well's potential, and the permitting process goes smoothly, it could begin producing up to 300 acre-feet of water within a few years. The new resource would be evenly divided between the Island Co. and local ratepayers, who consumed a total of 400 acre-feet of water last year.

The utility said that maintaining the water system and boosting its capacity has been costly and time-consuming. In recent years, the utility has made seismic improvements at dams and reservoirs, replaced a pump house, repaired infrastructure damaged by fire and increased capacity of the island's main water storage basin, Thompson Reservoir.

Edison's desalination plant provides about 80% of the roughly 250,000 gallons of water consumed on the island each day during the slow winter months, with the rest coming from groundwater wells, utility officials said. In the summer, when the island population grows to more than 8,000 people on a given day, Edison relies mostly on groundwater wells.

Avalon is operating in Stage 1 restrictions, which prohibit the washing of streets, piers, parking lots and driveways. July's restrictions will fall under Stage 2, which begins when the water level at Thompson Reservoir drops below 300 acre-feet. In Stage 3, water usage must be reduced by 50%, and in Stage 4 by 75%.

In Hite's remarks to the City Council, he noted that U.S. government meteorologists are forecasting that an El Niño weather pattern will return to the Pacific Ocean this winter, probably bringing ample rain to California.

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