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From the Los Angeles Times

California has enough water

The trick is to conserve the valuable state resource, make wise decisions about how to use it and cut waste.

By Dorothy Green and Jamie Simons

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For all the doom and gloom about water in California, here's a surprising truth: California has enough water to meet its needs today and tomorrow without new dams, peripheral canals or catastrophic costs. But there is a rub. It will take political will and better management.

If, given the notorious stranglehold of special interests on Sacramento, you are rolling your eyes and saying, "Give up. It's hopeless," hold on a moment. There is a road map that can lead to a better future for Californians. Here's how:

Conservation. Stop hosing down the driveway, buy more efficient appliances and plug leaks. And by all means, every house should have a water meter; believe it or not, millions of houses in the great Central Valley still do not. With this kind of affordable and existing technology, we can save about one-third of the water used indoors, according to the nonpartisan Pacific Institute. Planting California-friendly, drought-tolerant plants and installing smart sprinkler systems can help to conserve more than half our outdoor residential water.

Store groundwater more efficiently. Right now, Los Angeles County's Department of Public Works puts winter and spring storm water (and some reclaimed water from the county sanitation districts) into ponds so it can soak into the ground and be available for use during the dry summer months. Why not also do it with wet-year rain surpluses for use in dry years? There is plenty of storage capacity underground in the huge aquifers that lie beneath the San Gabriel Valley, San Fernando Valley and Chino areas. And a bonus: Water doesn't evaporate when stored underground.

Reuse nearly all of our wastewater. Before anyone yells "toilet to tap," let's establish that the last time there was "new" water on the planet was in the Garden of Eden. As it stands now, wastewater is treated until it is almost potable, and then most of it is thrown away. Los Angeles' Hyperion sewage treatment plant produces the seventh-biggest freshwater river in the state. It flows dependably, year round -- but directly into the ocean. What if, instead, this water was reused for landscape irrigation and industrial processes? Or better yet, allowed to seep through the soil -- completing the filtering process -- back into the aquifer, where it could then be pumped up for drinking water.

Thinking "yuck?" Consider this: The Colorado River, a major source of water for Southern California, contains the treated wastewater of Las Vegas. The delta that stretches from Sacramento to the San Francisco Bay, another major source of imported water to Southern California, contains the water from 10 sewage treatment plants that serve the communities in and around the delta. As we said, there is no such thing as new water.

Stop throwing away storm water. The Army Corps of Engineers and others built a marvelously efficient storm-drain system to prevent flooding. You may have seen it's centerpiece. It's called the Los Angeles River. This concrete channel is very efficient at pushing flood water through the county and out into the ocean, but that no longer makes sense. Building multipurpose projects, such as parks designed to hold water until it soaks into the ground, has multiple rewards: an increased water supply, improved water quality, additional green space, more recreational space, enhanced wildlife habitat and an increase in nearby property values.

Cut agricultural water use. This is the biggie, the one that makes politicians run for cover only to reappear in the Central Valley during campaign fundraising time. Agriculture uses about 80% of California's developed water -- the water delivered from dams and aqueducts. That has to change, or nothing will change.

If we can reduce agricultural water use by just 10%, that would almost double the water available for our cities. Can this be done effectively and efficiently? Try asking arid nations such as Israel. They know how to make the most of every drop of water, and we should too.

Almost half of the state's agricultural water is used on four crops of little economic value: cotton, rice, irrigated pasture and alfalfa. Farmers are businessmen. As federal subsidies for cotton and rice dry up, and the cost of water goes up, farmers will change their ways.

So let's celebrate the defeat of the dueling water bonds in the Legislature. Let's also spare voters the expensive initiative campaigns that both Republican and Democratic sides are planning to launch. The problem is not water. The problem is persuading citizens and agencies to put aside their business-as-usual mentality and cooperate for the greater good. And when the goal has been accomplished through good leadership and smart stewardship, let's all raise a glass of water and toast ourselves.

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