



NEWS RELEASE

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California Water Myths Distort Critical Policy Debate

SAN FRANCISCO, December 7, 2009 — Myths about California's water problems—and their solutions—are hindering the development of effective policies to manage one of the state's most important natural resources, says a study released today by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC).

These myths persist, in part, because California's water management is decentralized, with more than a thousand local and regional water agencies responsible for water delivery, wastewater treatment, and flood control. This system encourages innovation and responsiveness to local problems, but fails to foster the collection and sharing of information.

"California's water system is vast, complex, and highly interconnected. But Californians lack a shared understanding of how it works and the options for improving it," says Ellen Hanak, director of research at PPIC and report co-author. "It's essential to move beyond myth as population growth and climate change put even more pressure on our resources."

The report's research team has expertise in ecology, economics, engineering, law, and the physical sciences. It includes Jay Lund, Ariel Dinar, Brian Gray, Richard Howitt, Jeffrey Mount, and Peter Moyle—from three University of California campuses—and Barton "Buzz" Thompson of the Stanford University Law School.

The report focuses on eight myths about the state's water supply, ecosystems, and the legal and political aspects of governing the system. These myths include:

- **California is running out of water.** The reality: California has run out of *cheap* water. Water will be increasingly scarce, but there is ample evidence that Californians will be able to adapt to scarcity. In recent years, farmers have adopted more efficient irrigation methods, urban residents have cut water use, and water agencies have improved water management.
- **A villain is responsible for California's water problems.** One of the most common myths is that the system would work well if it weren't for the wasteful Southern California homeowner. Or the farmer who gets federally subsidized water. Or the Endangered Species Acts. The reality? There are no true villains. Water use on the South Coast, where most Southern Californians live, is among the lowest in California. Farmers south of the Delta who receive subsidized water from the Central Valley Project have improved their water efficiency considerably since the 1980s. And removing the Endangered Species Act's restrictions on water diversions would not be likely to provide much more water for human uses. In short, the system's problems are a shared responsibility, and all sectors can make better use of water.
- **We can build our way out of California's water problems.** In reality, no technological solution to California's water problems—desalination plants, new surface storage, a peripheral canal—is a panacea. New infrastructure investments are best used as part of a portfolio approach that includes water markets, underground storage, reuse, and conservation.

- **We can conserve our way out of California’s water problems.** Conservation is important, but its potential to free up water for other users is often overstated. Moreover, some conservation measures, such as replacing lawns with plants that need less water, can be costly to implement.
- **Healthy aquatic ecosystems conflict with a healthy economy.** Environmental regulations often interfere with traditional economic activities. But healthy fisheries, water-based recreation, and improved water quality provide significant economic value, which may offset these costs. Better measures of water use costs and benefits can help guide watershed management policies.
- **More water will lead to healthy fish populations.** In reality, more water alone is rarely sufficient to restore a fish population. Water that has the wrong temperature, nutrients, or sediment may harm fish, and so can water without sufficient habitat. Supporting native fish will require strategies that account for the complexities of aquatic ecosystems.
- **California’s water rights laws impede reform and sustainable management.** In this view, California cannot effectively address its water issues because of archaic and entrenched water rights. The reality is that the law already contains legal tools to ensure that water uses are reasonable and promote the public interest—we just need to start using them.
- **We can find a consensus that will keep all parties happy.** The reality is that many of California’s big water policy decisions require tough tradeoffs. In such cases, state or federal leadership is needed to provide direction and broker solutions.

The PPIC study recommends improving the flow of existing information, collecting more information in the field from surface and groundwater users—an unpopular idea among many water users—and expanding the analysis and synthesis of data pertinent to important management and policy choices.

“Information alone won’t dispel myths about the water system, because myths provide convenient rhetoric in a world of scarcity and tradeoffs,” co-author Lund says. “But if the state’s leaders are serious about solving California’s water challenges they’ll need better reporting and analysis to improve policy understanding and options, even if some stakeholders resist.”

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ABOUT PPIC

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