



California Water Myths

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SUMMARY

California has a complex, highly interconnected, and decentralized water system. Although local operations draw on considerable expertise and analysis, broad public policy and planning discussions about water often involve a variety of misperceptions—or myths—about how the system works and the options available for improving its performance.

The prevalence of myth and folklore makes for lively rhetoric but hinders the development of effective policy and raises environmental and economic costs. Moving beyond myth toward a water policy based on facts and science is essential if California is to meet the multiple, sometimes competing, goals for sustainable management in the 21st century: satisfying agricultural, environmental, and urban demands for water supply and quality and ensuring adequate protection from floods.

We focus on eight common water myths, involving water supply, ecosystems, and the legal and political aspects of governing California’s water system. These are not the only California water myths, but they are ones we find to be particularly distracting and disruptive to public policy discussions.

Often, myths serve the rhetorical purposes of particular stakeholders. And they persist because our public policy debates are not sufficiently grounded in solid technical and scientific information about how we use and manage water. In combating these myths, we hope to set the stage for a more rational and informed approach to water policy and management in the state.

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This report seeks to rebuild public policy discussions on myth-free foundations. Improving the collection, analysis, synthesis, and use of accurate information about the state's water system is also necessary to encouraging fact-based policies.

Of course, information alone will not dispel California's water myths. But better information can fashion more effective responses to California's many ongoing and future water challenges. In the months and years ahead, policymakers and voters will be involved in crucial decisions regarding one of California's most precious and controversial resources. Let's be sure those decisions are based on reality, not myth.

Myth	Reality
1. California is running out of water.	California has run out of abundant water and will need to adapt to increasing water scarcity.
2. [Insert villain here] is responsible for California's water problems.	There is no true villain in California water policy, but opportunities exist for all sectors to better use and manage water.
3. We can build our way out of California's water problems.	New infrastructure can contribute to California's water supply solutions, but it is not a cure-all.
4. We can conserve our way out of California's water problems.	Water conservation is important, but its effectiveness is often overstated.
5. Healthy aquatic ecosystems conflict with a healthy economy.	Healthy ecosystems provide significant value to the California economy, and many opportunities exist for mutually beneficial water management.
6. More water will lead to healthy fish populations.	Fish need more than water to thrive.
7. California's water rights laws impede reform and sustainable management.	The legal tools for reform are already present in California's water rights laws; we just need to start using them.
8. We can find a consensus that will keep all parties happy.	Tough tradeoffs mean that consensus is not achievable on all water issues; higher levels of government will need to assert leadership.

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