

Lack of precipitation not at the heart of California's water woes

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The lack of precipitation in California this winter has received significant attention in the media recently, with the latest Sierra snowpack survey finding snow levels of only 66 percent of average. **Central Valley Project water users have already been told to expect only 25 percent of their annual water allocation this year and State Water Project contractors are not much better off at only a 40 percent projected allocation.**

But the current snowpack is not the only factor used to determine allocations; water storage levels are another key element.

Surprisingly, most of the state's major reservoirs are sitting well above historic average. These stored supplies remain healthy and could be used to make more water available to the state's residents, farms and businesses, but that isn't happening. How could it happen?

The answer is through improved conveyance.

While water is stored in the north part of the state, water managers have been limited in their ability to transport it to where it's needed. The one major reservoir in the state that is not currently at an above average level is the San Luis Reservoir, which farmers throughout the Central Valley and 25 million southern Californians rely on as their major south of Delta storage.

The current system relies on pumping plants near Tracy to deliver water to south of Delta users. Unfortunately, these pumping facilities are often curtailed to purportedly protect endangered species in the Delta. This often makes getting enough water through the Delta to fill San Luis Reservoir a challenge, even when plenty of water is available.



Reservoirs, such as Lake Shasta, remain filled to historical averages, yet that water is not available for the state's residents, farms and businesses.

Throughout this winter, restrictions imposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service forced the curtailment of exports, which resulted in the loss of over 800,000 acre-feet of water that flowed out to the ocean, rather than to California water users. Coincidentally, 800,000 acre-feet is almost exactly the water needed to bring San Luis Reservoir up to 100 percent capacity.

Governor Brown's water plan, being considered as part of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan process, would move the intake facilities to the north Delta, where purported impacts on endangered fish species would be reduced. Even following a dry winter like 2013, such a system would have been able to capitalize on high flows early in the winter to fill San Luis Reservoir, which would have likely resulted in higher water project allocations for State Water Project and Central Valley Project contractors. An upgraded Delta conveyance system will provide much needed flexibility to better manage uneven weather patterns, such as those expected in the future under changing climate conditions.



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A Project of the Coalition for a Sustainable Delta