

DRIP BY DRIP: STATE WATER PLAN LEANS HEAVILY ON CONSERVATION TO MEET NEEDS

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By John Driscoll, staff writer

Water flows downhill, but how it flows to your shower or toilet, or to rows of cotton or fruit trees, figures largely into how much water has to flow downhill.

For the first time, the state's water plan update aggressively tackles conservation as a means of loosening up California's notoriously tight water supply. That's a significant change, policy groups say, from days when the state looked closest at building new dams and infrastructure to bridge the gap between availability and demand.

The draft California Water Plan Update looks at a set of possible futures into 2030, putting a magnifying glass on what happens if water use surges, stays the same or tapers off through conservation.

"It's the 21st century," said Peter Gleick, executive director of the independent research and policy group the Pacific Institute. "The days are over when we can just take more water from our rivers and our aquifers."

Like California's vast, interconnected water systems, the plan is hugely complicated. Hundreds of pages cover the state Department of Water Resources' strategic plan, management strategies and reports on 10 regions. Some of the key messages are dealt with up front.

Between 1.2 million and 2.4 million acre feet per year -- enough to supply between 2.4 million to 4.8 million average households for a year -- could be freed up through urban water use conservation. The plan touts this as the largest source of available water, significantly higher than the next source, which is improved management and groundwater storage. That could free up 500,000 to 2.1 million acre feet per year.

Agricultural efficiency -- perhaps most important to the diverted rivers of the North Coast -- could save 200,000 to 800,000 acre feet each year.

While a restoration plan has now allowed more water to flow down the Trinity River, billions of gallons still flow to the Sacramento River and on to farms in the western San Joaquin Valley. Alfalfa, grain and potatoes take water from the Upper Klamath River. And the Eel River is diverted to the Russian River, which grape growers and towns tap.

Some say the agricultural efficiency figure is too low. Gleick holds that trimming cotton, alfalfa and rice growing in the Central Valley and replacing some of it with fruits and vegetables, along with faster shifts from flood irrigation to sprinkler and drip irrigation would yield significant benefits.

The North Coast's mountain ranges see heavy rainfall, accounting for about 41 percent of the state's runoff. Average runoff for the region -- which stretches up the coast from Tomales Bay

and east to the border of the Goose Lake Basin -- dwarfs that of other regions at 29 million acre feet per year.

Yet the population in the region is only 2 percent of California's.

The North Coast has the supply, and the rest of the state has the demand.

But the area has its own challenges, the plan reads. Water quality issues from logging, rural roads and agriculture are in the spotlight, and channel modifications and diversions have radically changed water quality conditions by concentrating contaminants, the plan reads.

It points to the Klamath River fish kill of 2002 as evidence. But the plan also gives the lowest estimate of the number of salmon that were killed, and points to water quality as the key reason -- which runs contrary to more specific reports that hold low flows and migration barriers as other contributors.

While the region's runoff is vast, it is highly seasonal. The dry summers limit water supplies in the area, something made obvious by recent year's stress on the Mattole River's water.

The plan suggests that no matter what course is followed in the area -- whether status quo, more or less intensive use of water -- demands on water are expected to grow over the next quarter-century.

Some who have read the draft plan hope to correct small errors, but also want to press for emphasis away from further dam building on the Eel and Klamath. Some dams are still on the books, dormant and unlikely to be constructed, but on the books nonetheless.

Local river advocate Denver Nelson was also uncertain about the new focus on conservation.

"I guess I'm a little cynical about treating everything with water conservation," he said, "because eventually you are going to run out of water.

Ultimately, you'll have to deal with limiting population growth and new development."

The plan does deal with other methods of balancing supply and demand, including recycling municipal water, new storage through the state and federal partnership CALFED, desalination, improved water conveyance and even precipitation enhancement -- read, cloud seeding.

It also calls for the state to provide incentives and help local governments with resource and drought plans. Wastewater and drinking water facilities need to be maintained and improved, the plan recommends.

Funding strategies for public investments, research and development, and efforts to draw in tribal governments to water planning processes on all levels are recommended in the plan.

And this:

"DWR and other state agencies should explicitly consider public trust values in the planning and allocation of water resources and protect public trust uses whenever feasible," one recommendation reads.

Robert Wilkinson runs the water policy program at the Bren School at the University of California Santa Barbara, and was one of about 60 people in the advisory group for the plan along with Gleick. He said that the plan shows opportunities for supply that don't involve taking water from ecosystems.

"I think this is indicating that there's tremendous potential to meet these needs and restore the environment," Wilkinson said.

But Wilkinson also said the plan isn't as thorough on lining out the environmental restoration needs for the state.

One thing the plan unquestionably has is enough paper to build a dam.

It is available on the Internet at www.waterplan.water.ca.gov The highlights and the strategic plan -- volume 1 -- are available in print along with a CD.

A public hearing -- one of several -- will be held in Eureka at the U.C. Agricultural Center at 5630 S. Broadway on June 14 from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. #