



Posted on Thu, Oct. 09, 2003

Water plan calls for conservation

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SACRAMENTO BEE

California's first new water plan since the Pete Wilson administration is calling for a multibillion-dollar investment in water conservation, recycling and other programs to quench the state's growing thirst by 2030.

The plan endorses more investigation of water storage projects but says the state can easily gain about 5 million acre-feet -- enough for about 10 million new households -- by investing in better use of existing supplies.

The report wades gingerly through two of the most contentious water issues in California -- whether to increase the size of the Delta water pumps and to build five water-storage projects in the Central Valley.

In its draft, the state Department of Water Resources recommends continued studies of such projects -- including expansion of the Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County. But it does not include water storage among its top tier of likely projects.

Drafted by a diverse group of stakeholders over three years, the blueprint released Tuesday is already generating criticism.

Unlike a 1998 water plan produced by Wilson appointees, the new one does not tout the need for new reservoirs or project dire shortages. Nor does it call for statewide regulation of ground water -- a measure long touted by environmentalists but opposed by many farm districts.

Instead, the report recommends relatively "easy-to-implement" fixes -- ranging from water recycling to replenishment of aquifers. It even calls for a state program of seeding clouds to generate more precipitation -- an idea once dismissed as a Jules Verne fantasy.

Jonas Minton, water resources department deputy, said the new water plan reflects the huge strides some cities and farmers have made in using water more wisely.

"Every day, farmers are finding ways to get more crop per drop," said Minton, a former director of the Sacramento Water Forum.

Some farm leaders say the report overestimates the savings from water conservation and recycling. They fear that cities will turn to farm districts for water as the state grows.

"We feel that the water plan, as now drafted, would lead to a disastrous shortage of water and food," said Alex Hildebrand, a Delta farmer and engineer who sat on a report advisory panel.

The plan sets the tone of water policy for years to come. State law requires its update every five years.

In 1998, the department projected the state could experience shortages of up to 6 million acre-feet annually by 2010. Conservation advocates said the Wilson administration overlooked increased use of low-flow toilets, drip irrigation and other water-saving measures, and so the Davis administration changed its approach.

Betsy Reifsnider, executive director of Friends of the River, said the department did not adopt many of the recommendations her group and others sought. Some environmentalists, she said, wanted more emphasis on farm conservation. Others wanted restrictions on ground water pumping similar to those in other states.

Reifsnider said the water resources agency did its best to achieve a rough consensus among widely differing views.

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