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Now Is Not the Time to Relax Water Conservation Mandate
By Rob Katherman

This winter the northern half of California received slightly above average rain and snow. As a result, state water officials backed off from mandatory water conservation requirements. Does this mean the drought is over?

Not by a long shot.

Unfortunately, the expected rains of *El Niño* did not materialize in Southern California, leading us into a fifth year of drought, with precipitation in Southern California just half of what we used to consider “normal”. The truth is that past rainfall measures are no longer an indicator of what we can “normally” expect in the future.

We learned from the Colorado River Basin Tree-Ring Survey, which studied over 1,000 years of rainfall amounts in that basin, that there are periods of time when drought can last a century.

The State Water Resources Control Board announced last week that water conservation fell to 17% savings this August – down from 27 percent savings in August last year. That means water savings are down more than 36% from last year. If that reduction in water savings continues for the next year, Californians will use 40 billion gallons (480,000 acre-feet) more water this year than last year, enough annual water for almost 4 million people.

In the meantime, weather forecasters are predicting “La Nina” – a seasonal period marked by lower ocean temperatures that reduce rainfall below “average.” This means that the 5-year drought in Southern California is likely to continue.

What cannot be overlooked is that Southern California’s sources of imported water face real long term threats. The Colorado River is over-committed with more demand on the river’s water than there is water available. Its biggest reservoir, Lake Mead, remains at a record low after levels declined in 14 of the past 17 years. Meanwhile, the Sacramento Delta faces increased demand by agricultural users and regulatory curtailment due to environmental reasons, as well as potential catastrophe from even a moderate earthquake.

With such threats to our imported supply in place, it’s clear that water diverted from Northern California and the Colorado River cannot be relied on to meet the water needs of Southern California.

That is why over a decade ago, the Water Replenishment District (WRD), which covers about 420 square miles and serves over 4 million residents, chose a course of action to eliminate the region’s reliance on imported water for annual replenishment of our local groundwater basins and adopted the Water Independence Now (WIN) strategy. WIN is a series of projects that utilize additional recycled water and stormwater capture with the goal of making our groundwater aquifers completely independent of imported water.

To meet that goal of independence from imported water, WRD in the last decade has accomplished the following:

- Completed an advanced water treatment plant in East Long Beach, providing 100 percent recycled water to the Alamitos Barrier.
- Partnered with West Basin Municipal Water District to build 2 expansions of their advanced treatment water plant in El Segundo, completely eliminating the need for imported water for the West Coast Barrier running from LAX Airport to Palos Verdes.
- Partnered with the City of LA on an advanced treatment plant on Terminal Island to provide recycled water for the Dominguez Gap Seawater Barrier north of the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. The second phase of this plant will be finished and operating by the end of this year enabling this barrier to use 100% recycled water.
- Construction has started on our advanced water treatment plant known as the Groundwater Reliability Improvement Project, or GRIP. When completed in 2018, it will eliminate the need for any imported water for replenishment of our groundwater aquifers and will completely drought-proof the basins.
- Captured additional storm water for replenishment by expanding the capacity of the Whittier Narrows Conservation Pool, installing two rubber dams on the San Gabriel River and construction of an Interconnection Pipeline between the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel River Spreading Grounds

WRD just adopted our 20-year Groundwater Master Plan, which provides a roadmap to increase groundwater pumping by 90 million gallons per day by using additional recycled water and stormwater capture, enough to meet all the water needs for nearly 4 million local residents in our District.

What we need to secure our water future are more locally sustainable projects along with a continued commitment to conservation. In order to cut our dependence on increasingly unreliable imported water, conservation efforts must remain in place. We have worked too hard over the past two years to save water to now backslide into our old water consuming ways. Conservation is the fastest and cheapest way we can adapt to the “new normal” of chronic water scarcity.

Our water conservation efforts plus increased use of local stormwater and recycled water resources can reduce the amount of imported water consumed in southern LA County by 50 percent.

If we all pitch in, we can do it.