

Headline: South state blazes imperil water supply, officials say

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WASHINGTON -- As wildfires continued to rage Wednesday in parts of Southern California, water officials warned that the blazes may threaten the state's long-term supply.

"We are rapidly draining our reservoirs," Jeff Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, told congressional aides and lobbyists at a Capitol Hill briefing.

He and others said unequivocally that California has more than enough water to combat the fires, which have raged across the state for four days.

"The question is, how do we replace it?" Kightlinger said. "Everyone is out there with a hose trying to blanket everything with water. We are watching our reservoirs just plummeting right now."

The Metropolitan Water District serves 18 million people in six counties throughout the Southern California, but droughts, growth and climate change are placing a growing strain on the water supply for the entire state.

Problems with the ailing Delta, the hub of the state's water supply, are worsening.

A low snowpack in the Sierra this past winter left many reservoirs below normal levels. And now, water officials said, firefighters are pumping out hundreds of thousands of gallons a day.

"Our first priority is lives. But we've got all kinds of implications that can emanate from this disastrous fire," said Brad Hiltcher, the water district's representative in Washington.

Earlier this month, state lawmakers missed a deadline to strike a compromise on a \$9 billion bond measure to fix the state's water system.

The governor and some lawmakers want to put the measure on the Feb. 5 primary ballot, arguing that problems with the state's water supply are urgent.

Republicans and Democrats have sparred, however, on whether reservoirs or a mix of conservation and underground storage represent the best method of saving the supply.

Kightlinger called the gridlock "unfortunate," but said he remains hopeful the Legislature will resolve its differences.

In the meantime, he and others urged Congress to continue funding desalination and other water recycling projects.

Bill Maile, a spokesman for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, declined to comment on concerns that the wildfires are affecting the state's water reservoirs.

"California's short- and long-term water supply is critical, and a top priority for the governor," Maile said. "Right now he is focused on the aggressive response effort."