

## **Dry times ahead - even for the Bay Area**

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**Opinion Editorial**

**By Timothy Quinn, Executive Director of the Association of California Water Agencies**

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With its mild climate and breathtaking views, it's easy to think the San Francisco Bay Area is immune from California's water problems. But the region faces its own share of water challenges, and its economy and lifestyle are no less reliant on water than any other part of the state.

State leaders and environmental authorities agree that California is facing a serious water crisis that cannot be ignored. Yet, despite intense media coverage and focus by the governor and legislators, the public remains unaware of the state's water problems. That's why a statewide coalition of 450 public water agencies has launched a public education program to inform people about critical challenges now confronting the state's water supply and delivery system. Those challenges affect each and every Californian.

In the Bay Area and throughout California, water is a critical factor in our economy, quality of life and environment. Experts are warning that California's water problems are so serious that many parts of the state, including water-rich Northern California, may soon be facing water restrictions and reduced supplies. In the Bay Area, local water agencies, including the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, Santa Clara Valley Water District and East Bay Municipal Utility District, have already asked their customers to voluntarily conserve water.

One of the biggest worries is the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a prized estuary and the single most important link in California's water supply system. The delta is in an ecological crisis that threatens both our water supply and the environment. To complicate matters, a strong earthquake could collapse deteriorating delta levees, impeding state water deliveries for up to two years.

While many Bay Area residents regularly enjoy the delta's recreational aspects, they may not be aware of the critical role it plays in the Bay Area water supply. In fact, one-third of the Bay Area's drinking water is tied to this critical estuary. In portions of Alameda County, as much as 80 percent of the water used comes from the delta. The Contra Costa County Water District uses 100 percent delta water to supply its

customers, while the Santa Clara Valley Water District receives 50 percent of its water from this important source.

The delta is also an important environmental resource that is home to 750 distinct species of plants and wildlife, including the threatened delta smelt. A U.S. District Court recently ordered the state's largest water systems to cut deliveries by one-third next year to protect the fish - potentially the largest court-ordered water supply reduction in California history.

The effects of that reduction already are being felt in the Bay Area. While water agencies are still determining the exact effect of this court decision on their customers, the prospect of stringent water use restrictions - and even rationing - is very real for many communities.

These challenges, combined with the demands of the state's growing population and the effects of climate change, create a water crisis that we cannot ignore. With reserves already low for many agencies following a 10-day stoppage to delta water deliveries this summer to protect the smelt, the situation will be dire if dry conditions continue.

Drought is a serious worry to state water managers. The 2007 water year (Sept. 1 to Aug. 31) was one of the driest years on record. Forecasters now predict a La Niña - dubbed a "demon diva of drought" by weather experts - this winter, which could result in two-thirds less rainfall than normal. Frankly, another record-dry year, combined with the cutbacks, will spell disaster for a system that already struggles to meet the needs of people and the environment.

Never before has California's water system faced the troubles it faces today. It is critical that Bay Area residents - and indeed all Californians - take the combined threat of drought, climate change, supply reductions and potential natural disasters seriously. We simply cannot afford to ignore these problems - California's economy, environment and quality of life depend on a reliable water system.

*Tim Quinn is the executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, a coalition of 450 public water agencies. For more information on the state's water problems, visit [www.calwatercrisis.org](http://www.calwatercrisis.org).*