

**Opinion Editorial: Public gradually becoming aware of California's growing water crisis**

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**By Tim Quinn and Stan Williams**

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What would you do if you were told to prepare for a 75 percent cut in water deliveries next year?

That's essentially what the state Department of Water Resources told water agencies last month when it announced an initial supply forecast of just 25 percent for 2008. Water managers knew this would be a tough year for water deliveries, with court-ordered cutbacks, drought conditions and climate change all creating problems for the state's water system. But few expected the state's initial forecast to be so low.

Despite this weekend's storms, water supplies are critically low. And, although there has been intense media coverage and attention by the governor and legislators, it has been difficult to get the public to focus on the state's water problems. In the fall, a statewide coalition of 450 public water agencies decided to launch a public education program to inform people about critical challenges now confronting the state's water supply and delivery system. The good news is that the education program is working - the public is beginning to understand not only the variety of issues facing the state, but the severity of the problem as well.

Water is a critical resource for Santa Clara County and the entire valley. More than half the water the county uses originates hundreds of miles away - first as snow in the Sierra Nevada, then as river water that empties into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. That's why there is growing concern about how the region's economy, quality of life and environment will fare in the face of a deepening statewide water crisis.

Santa Clara County is the Bay Area's most populous county, with 24 percent of Bay Area residents living in it. Experts forecast that 1.8 million people will be living here by 2010, and the county will add another 127,000 residents by 2020. New population growth brings an increased demand for water. Although the Santa Clara Valley Water District has been aggressively working to reduce residential and commercial water use through conservation and efficiency programs, these programs alone are not enough to shield residents from the growing water crisis.

One of the biggest worries is the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the single most important link in California's water supply system. The delta funnels water to 25 million Californians and much of the state's farmlands.

An important environmental resource, the delta is home to 750 species of plants and wildlife, including the threatened delta smelt. However, the delta is in an ecological crisis that threatens both our water supply and the environment. Recently, a federal court ordered the state's two largest water systems to cut deliveries by up to nearly one-third next year to protect the fish - potentially the largest court-ordered water supply reduction in California history.

This natural estuary is a critical link in Santa Clara County's water supply. In an average year, more than half of the water used in Santa Clara County is conveyed through the delta.

The extremely low state water allocation for 2008 and below-average precipitation are creating major worries for local water managers. California's water reserves are already low for many agencies following a record dry year this year and a 10-day halt in deliveries from the delta to protect smelt. Now weather experts are predicting a La Niña effect this winter, which could result in two-thirds less rainfall than normal. Another record-dry year, combined with the cutbacks, could 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 Santa Clara residents - and all Californians - take the combined threat of drought, climate change, supply reductions and potential natural disasters seriously. We cannot afford to ignore these problems. California's present and future economy, environment and quality of life depend on a reliable water system.