

California in grip of demon diva of drought

Ventura County Star

By Timothy Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, a coalition of 450 public water agencies

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When the rest of the world thinks of Southern California, it thinks of beaches, of swimming pools, of water. Water has always played a major role in life in the Southland. And with good reason. Without a steady supply of imported water, Southern California wouldn't exist as we know it today.

Because the entire region depends heavily on this important resource, 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. Experts are warning that California's water problems are so serious that many parts of the state, including the Southland, may soon be facing water rationing and reduced supplies.

State leaders and environmental authorities agree that California's statewide water system is in crisis. 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 recently decided to launch a public education program to inform people about critical challenges now confronting the state's water supply and delivery system. These challenges affect each and every Californian, and we can no longer afford to ignore them.

With nearly 18 million residents, the Southern California region is the second-largest metropolitan area in the nation. Drawn by the area's economy and culture, people are continuing to move to the area, increasing the demand for water. Local water agencies have been aggressively working to reduce residential and commercial water use through conservation and efficiency programs. While these efforts are critical, they 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. While this natural estuary is hundreds of miles away, it provides more than one-third of Southern California's water supply. But for all its importance, the Delta is in an ecological crisis that threatens both our water supply and the environment. To complicate matters, a strong earthquake could damage deteriorating Delta levees, crippling state water deliveries for up to two years.

While the Delta funnels water to 25 million Californians, it is also an important environmental resource that is home to 750 distinct species of plants and wildlife, including the threatened Delta smelt. Recently, a federal court ordered the state's two 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.

There is no doubt that Southland residents will experience a significant reduction in water supply because of the court order. In fact, Long Beach has already imposed mandatory water restrictions. Just recently, the Metropolitan Water District not only announced rate increases and a 30 percent supply cutback for agricultural customers, but also warned of the potential of water rationing in the future.

These challenges, combined with the demands of a growing population and the effect of climate change, create a water-supply and delivery crisis that we cannot disregard. With water reserves already low for many agencies following a 10-day halt in deliveries from the Delta this summer to protect smelt, the situation will be dire if dry conditions continue.

Drought is a serious worry to state water managers. This year was one of the driest years on record, and weather experts are now predicting a La Niña — a "demon diva of drought" — this winter, which could result in two-thirds less rainfall than normal.

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 Southern California residents — and 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 present and future economy, environment and quality of life depend on a reliable water system.