

Drought Conditions Spread Across the West – Are We Ready?

Concerning forecasts for runoff into the Rio Grande and the Colorado River are just the start of the bad news for the West as California and other southwestern states face warm weather, below average precipitation and paltry snowpack.

Written by [Alastair Bland](#) Published on σ Feb. 14, 2018 Read time Approx. 4 minutes



Minimal snow was found at the Phillips Station meadow on January 3 before the start of the first snow survey of 2018, conducted by the California Department of Water Resources. *Kelly M. Grow/ California Department of Water Resources*

The driest December in California’s recorded history was followed by a relieving gush of rain in January, when it seemed there was a chance the state would be on track to receive at least its average level of precipitation.

Now, shortly after a record-breaking midwinter heatwave and seemingly endless blue skies, general optimism is waning as February shapes up to be even drier than December, despite a soaking Los Angeles received on Monday. A formidable high-pressure ridge has settled off the West Coast, deflecting storms northward in much the same pattern observed in 2013, 2014 and 2015, and though scientists and policy experts debate the definition of “drought,” few would disagree that the American West is in the grip of another extraordinary dry spell.

According to the [U.S. Drought Monitor](#), most of California is either abnormally dry or experiencing drought, and about two-thirds of Arizona and three-fourths of New Mexico are facing severe or extreme drought. The Rio Grande, a major water source for much of the Southwest, contains just half the water it did during recent drought years. Currently, the rate of flow at the Otowi Bridge in New Mexico is 21 percent of average – what hydrologists say could be the lowest such reading in 70 years.

“The river is going to be critically dry this year,” said Jen Pelz, WildEarth Guardians’ wild rivers program director and a specialist in Rio Grande hydrology.

She said that according to current projections, most of the Rio Grande downstream of Colorado is likely to be running at a trickle of less than 100 cubic feet (2.8 cubic meters) per second. Such conditions are likely to devastate the Rio Grande silvery minnow, an endangered species that occurs in a 174-mile (280-km) length of the lower river in New Mexico. The fish lives a lifespan of just two years, which means multiple years in a row of poor conditions can have serious population impacts. Pelz said the silvery minnow’s numbers spiked after 2017’s abundant precipitation.

“The population bloomed, and this year virtually all of them could die,” said Pelz, who noted that a handful of other birds and fishes will be imperiled by a dry winter.

If relief for the ecosystem doesn’t come from Pacific Ocean storms, it isn’t likely to arrive from the mountains where the Rio Grande begins, either.

“We would need to get so much snow in the next two months to get to just half of normal,” Pelz said.

At most survey sites in New Mexico and southern Colorado, snowpack levels were recently logged at [less than 25 percent of average](#). Angus Goodbody, a forecast hydrologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Water and Climate Center, said many sites are at 30-year lows. At several stations, he said, there hasn’t been so little snow in 50 to 80 years. Winter and spring storms, as well as summer monsoons, could give a boost to the Rio Grande, though the odds of such relief seem low.

“If things remain dry, a record-low runoff year is nearly assured,” Goodbody said.



Dry conditions on top of Monarch Pass, which sits at 11,312 feet above sea level, as seen on January 4, 2018. Colorado is experiencing a record low snowfall during the 2017-18 winter season. (Aaron Ontiveroz/The Denver Post via Getty Images)

Throughout the Rocky Mountain headwaters of the Colorado River, snowpack levels are [67 percent](#) of the 1980-to-2010 median.

“That’s really, really low,” said Jennifer Pitt, director of the National Audubon Society’s Colorado River program.

Unusually high temperatures and dry air, Pitt said, could make things worse by turning what little snow there is directly into water vapor rather than melting it.

“When that happens, what looks like will be a drier-than-average year can quickly become a very dry year,” she said.

The reservoirs of the Colorado River are seriously depleted, with Lake Powell just 56 percent full and Lake Mead 41 percent full. Pitt said Lake Mead’s surface elevation has rarely been so low since the reservoir was first filling with water during World War II.

In California, there is scarcely more, if any, snow blanketing the mountains than there was in 2015, when [climate scientists concluded](#) the season’s threadbare mountains were covered with the wispiest snowpack in 500 years. Currently, the central Sierra Nevada snowpack is 24 percent of average. In the Trinity Alps in the north and the southern Sierra Nevada, the snowpack is 17 percent of average.

“Fortunately, our reservoirs are in pretty good shape,” said Jay Lund, director of the University of California, Davis Center for Watershed Sciences. [Lake Shasta](#), the state’s biggest reservoir, is three-fourths full.

“But forests don’t see a benefit from full reservoirs,” Lund said. “People do, and so do farmers, and sometimes fish – but not forests.”

He expects many more trees to perish in the state’s inland mountains, where more than 129 million trees – mostly conifers – have died since 2010. This will mean still more fuel for wildfires, which caused severe destruction in 2017 in spite of a very wet winter and spring.

“Fires are my biggest environmental concern,” Lund said. “It’s hard to know what to do about it except to be prepared.”

As the dry winter proceeds, Lund said the chances of a normal water year diminish.

“March would have to be incredibly wet to get us out of this hole,” he said.

However, Lund said the first year of a drought is generally relatively easy to manage, thanks to high reservoir levels.

“It’s the second, third and fourth years of drought that become more difficult,” he said.

Correction: This story has been updated to reflect that Lake Mead’s surface elevation is not the lowest since it first filled but has rarely been so low.

California drought: Water conservation slipping statewide as dry weather returns

By [Paul Rogers](#) | progers@bayareanewsgroup.com and [Leigh Poitinger](#) | lpoitinger@bayareanewsgroup.com |

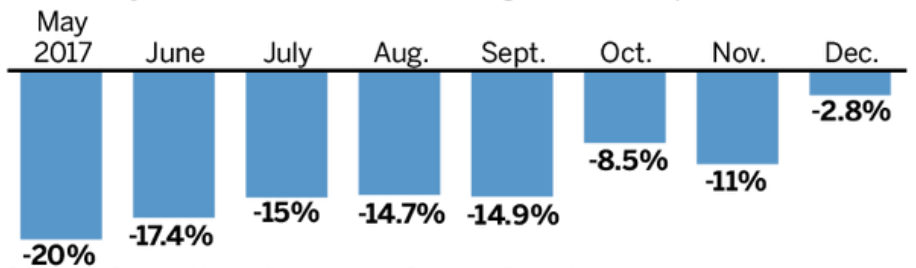
PUBLISHED: February 14, 2018 at 6:00 am | UPDATED: February 14, 2018 at 2:58 pm

As California suffers through another dry winter, increasing fears that drought conditions may be returning, the state's residents are dropping conservation habits that were developed during the last drought and steadily increasing their water use with each passing month.

A new analysis of state water records by this news organization found California's urban residents used 13.7 percent less water last year in the first eight months after Gov. Jerry Brown declared an end to the drought emergency than they used in the same eight-month period in 2013. But in each of those eight months last year, the water savings dropped from 20 percent in May to 2.8 percent in an unseasonably dry December.

CONSERVING LESS

The state has been saving less water almost every month since Gov. Jerry Brown declared the drought over in April, 2017.



Source: State Water Resources Control Board

BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

“We are having a very dry winter again,” said Heather Cooley, water program director at the Pacific Institute, an Oakland non-profit that studies water use patterns. “That wet winter we saw last year could have been one wet winter in a 10-to-12 year drought period. We have to be very cautious about our water use.”

But it's not clear Californians are getting that message. After last winter's record rains, the governor on April 7 ended statewide emergency water conservation targets imposed on cities and water districts. Many eased, or dropped entirely, their mandatory water restrictions, rebate programs and other incentives to conserve, because they wanted to make more money by selling more water, and in part because it was difficult to convince their customers of the urgency when the state had just seen its wettest winter in 20 years.

But with each passing month, the savings have shrunk. Californians opened the spigots to water their lawns, took longer showers and returned to pre-drought habits, state records show.

By July, statewide water use was down 15 percent, then 8.5 percent in October. By December, the most recent month for which the State Water Resources Control Board has data, statewide water use was only down 2.8 percent, compared with December 2013, the baseline year that state water regulators use for monthly water conservation reports.

Usually after California droughts, some conservation is locked in permanently. That happened after the 1976-77 drought, the 1987-92 drought and the 2007-2009 drought.

People who install low-flush toilets or replace lawns with water-efficient landscaping don't go back and remove them when it starts raining again, experts note. But as the memories of bone-dry conditions fade, it's common for residents to use more water, and for cities and water districts to drop tough rules, and limit rebates, which cost them money.

In recent months, all of those trends have been underway. But very hot, very dry weather, particularly in Southern California, where temperatures this winter have reached the 90s in Los Angeles and rainfall levels are below 25 percent of historic averages, have quickly sped the return to heavier water use.

Meanwhile, the Sierra snow pack level on Tuesday was just [22 percent of its historic average](#). That's lower than any Feb. 13 even during the worst years of the most recent drought, including 2015, when it was 26 percent on the same date.

That year, in the most stark depths of the drought, snow levels ended at 5 percent of normal on April 1, an all-time record low that led Brown that day to travel to a grassy meadow at Echo Summit near Lake Tahoe that should have been under five feet of snow and declare the first statewide mandatory water restrictions in California history, [with a target of reducing urban water use by 25 percent](#) — a goal the state nearly met.

“We're in better shape this year with our reservoir levels,” said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board. “But if we don't get any more snow — every day the news comes out that it's dry and the high pressure ridge is upon us again — I just get more nervous and more nervous. We learned a big lesson in that drought. Let's not forget it.”

Even though the drought emergency ended, the Brown administration required the state's 410 largest cities, water districts and private water companies to continue reporting their monthly use to the state. The administration also kept in place water wasting rules, such as making it illegal to hose off sidewalks, wash cars without a hose nozzle or rent hotel rooms without notifying guests that they can choose not to have their sheets and towels washed every day.

Those water wasting rules, which carried fines of up to \$500 for violators, lapsed in November when their emergency status expired. The state water board is scheduled to vote Feb. 20 to make them permanent, and two bills in the Legislature would give all cities the power to enforce them.

Ever since [Brown declared the drought over](#), some parts of California have conserved more than others.

The news organization's analysis shows that cities on the Central Coast saved the most water, 20.5 percent, in the May-December 2017 period, when compared with May-December 2013. Cities around the Bay Area saved 15.5 percent, and cities on in the South Coast region, mostly Los Angeles, San Diego and Orange County, saved the least, 11.7 percent.

Looking at individual communities, the Humboldt Bay Municipal Water District led the list, with a 56 percent reduction in water use in May-December, compared to the same period in 2013. But that's because of a fluke: a local power plant near Eureka that is a major water user was not operating. Next up on the savings list was Santa Barbara, which cut use 43.2 percent, and has had far less rainfall than other parts of the state.

In the Bay Area, Menlo Park saved the most, cutting use 29.4 percent. The city continues to offer \$125 rebates for people who buy low-flush toilets, along with paying \$2 per square foot for people who remove lawns. It also has a water wasting hotline, and hands out free low-flow showerheads, faucet aerators and other gear at City Hall, and passed an ordinance last year requiring all large new commercial buildings to have dual plumbing to use recycled water for toilets.

WATER USAGE BY DISTRICT

Here are the percentage change of water usage from May-Dec. 2017 compared to the same period in 2013 — the state's baseline year — by water district. (Source: State Water Resources Control Board)

“All the programs are still in place. Conservation is part of our water strategy,” said Azalea Mitch, Menlo Park's city engineer.

Among the Bay Area's largest water providers, San Jose Water Company, which raised its basic monthly service charge 26 percent and hiked its most commonly used tiered water rate 39 percent since June, 2016, reported a 22.5 percent reduction in water use from May-December 2017 compared to May-December 2013.

Contra Costa Water District cut by 19.2 percent, Santa Cruz by 19.5 percent, Palo Alto by 12.2 percent, San Francisco by 9 percent, Marin Municipal Water District by 8.9 percent and the East Bay Municipal Utility District by 12.1 percent.

Farther away, Los Angeles cut water use 9.1 percent and Sacramento, which still only allows residential lawn watering once a week until March 1, when it goes to twice a week, with fines of up to \$500 for multiple violators, showed a 20.9 percent reduction.

“You can get a lot of water savings, even voluntary savings, if you give people the impression that it's really important,” said Jay Lund, director of the UC-Davis Center for Watershed Sciences. “Most people try to be good citizens. They like to do their part. But if you don't remind them, their mind goes to other things.”

San Francisco Chronicle

Dry weather expected to persist in most of California

By [Kurtis Alexander](#) and [Sophie Haigney](#)

Updated 6:03 pm, Thursday, February 15, 2018

The odds of a March miracle rescuing California from a desperately dry winter are not looking good.

Thursday's monthly report from the federal Climate Prediction Center cites below-average rain and snow as the most likely weather scenario for almost all of the state for the next three months.

California has seen only a fraction of its average rainfall since December, with parts of the southern state getting less than 2 inches during what's historically the rainiest part of the year. Water managers have been holding out hope that the end of winter or early spring might bring a turnaround.

The three-month forecast, however, favors dry weather for all but a thin slice of northeast California. North of Redding, the probability of drier-than-normal conditions is only slightly greater than the chance of normal or wet conditions, according to the report. But for points south of Redding, the likelihood of normal or wet weather drops off sharply while the chances of drier weather increase to 40 percent or better.

Projections by the Climate Prediction Center, a division of the National Weather Service, are purposely broad because of the difficulty making long-term forecasts.

California water managers have yet to raise alarm about the lack of precipitation, but they are starting to worry.

"Worried is not a bad word. It's reality. This is not a good place to be," said David Rizzardo, chief of snow surveys for the Department of Water Resources.

As Rizzardo noted, the mountain snowpack that makes up nearly a third of the state's water supply was just 20 percent of average Thursday, lower than at this point during any of California's recent drought years.

For the state to get back to average, the next month and a half would have to deliver four to five times the amount of snow that's typical, Rizzardo said. This is what happened in 1991, when a series of late-season storms pounded California and popularized the concept of a March miracle. A repeat this year, though, is unlikely.

“If we’re betting men, that’s not something we put a lot of coin into,” he said.

Fortunately, California’s big reservoirs are holding more water than they normally do at this point because of last year’s drought-breaking storms. Most water agencies say these reserves will allow them to avoid water restrictions, at least in the near future.

Much of California, including the Bay Area, has not seen rain for three weeks, and the short-term forecast shows little sign of things changing.

A cooling trend is expected to begin this weekend, when temperatures are expected to drop into the mid-50s in San Francisco on Sunday and into the 40s on Monday and Tuesday. Other cities across the region — Half Moon Bay, Napa and San Jose, to name a few — could see even colder days, with the temperature dropping into the 30s.

“We could be hovering around records in some places, including San Francisco,” said Anna Schneider, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Monterey.

The last week of February could offer a slight chance of precipitation, said Schneider, who added that it’s still too early to say for certain. Until then, the forecast will be cold and dry.

“There’s a slight chance there might be some rain with this next system,” Schneider said. “But it would be slight, and it would be minimal at best.”

Kurtis Alexander and Sohpie Haigney are San Francisco Chronicle staff writers. Email: kalexander@sfchronicle.com, sophie.haigney@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@kurtisalexander](https://twitter.com/kurtisalexander), [@SophieHaigney](https://twitter.com/SophieHaigney)

East Bay Times

My Word: Sen. Glazer is ignoring 115,000 East County folks

By [Bryan Scott](#) |

PUBLISHED: February 18, 2018 at 9:42 am | UPDATED: February 19, 2018 at 11:07 am

East of Clayton and Antioch lies a broad swath of what used to be Contra Costa County farmland. The California senator representing this area, Sen. Steve Glazer, seems to be ignoring the public safety needs of the people who now live there.

While East County used to contain just 8,000 residents and the largest irrigated orchard west of the Mississippi, the 249-square-mile area now contains the cities of Brentwood (2016 population: 60,532) and Oakley (population 40,622), along with the unincorporated communities of Bethel Island, Byron, Discovery Bay, Knightsen, and Morgan Territory.

All combined East County has a rapidly growing population of more than 115,000 Californians.

A 2016 report by the Contra Costa County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) stated that emergency medical and fire services provided by the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD) were funded at a rate of \$94 per person. The report also said that these same services were funded at the rate of \$449 and \$370 per person in central parts of the county.

This low funding level has forced ECCFPD to close five of the eight fire stations operational in 2010, and drastically reduce staff. Response times are at levels that far exceed any industry standards or goals.

Yet, in East Contra Costa, have steadily deteriorated and the population and development grew. In 2016 ECCFPD recognized the funding crisis, called a “public safety emergency” by another elected official, and passed a resolution pleading for help from Senator Glazer and others in the legislature. You can view Resolution No. 2016-21 on the ECCFPD website.

The crisis was also the subject of reports by the Contra Costa County Grand Jury and a government task force, and it was noted by industry consultants as well as the media. Concerned residents have erected a billboard along Vasco Road, a major arterial route into East County, drawing attention to the crisis.

“The District lacks sufficient funds to provide fire and emergency response to the communities it was created to serve,” said a three- page letter the ECCFPD Board sent to Sen. Glazer in 2016, signed by then Board President Joel Bryant.

So far, Sen. Glazer has done little or nothing to address this issue.

A review of bills authored or co-authored by Sen. Glazer shows a wide range of subjects. He's sponsored ten "Awareness" month/week/day bills, several bills to ban smoking on public beaches and in parks, and one bill to change the names of California places because the names commemorate Civil War-era figures.

But he's authored or co-authored no bills to improve the public safety of his ECCFPD constituents.

The Courage Campaign is a group of mostly online organizations that advocate for progressive causes in California. Representing an estimated 1.4 million members, the Courage Campaign uses digital tools with grassroots community organizers and targeted messaging.

The group focuses on the areas of Economic Justice, Human Rights and Corporate and Political Accountability. It annually ranks California Senators and Assembly Members, and for 2017 Courage Campaign gives Senator Glazer a letter grade of "F," along with a numeric score of 32 out of 100.

The "Courage Score" as it is called, grades California legislators on political courage, how well they stand up for their constituents. While 16 percent of all California Senators received an "A" grade, 40 percent received an "F" grade in 2017, including Sen. Glazer.

According to the California Senate website, each Senator represents 931,349 Californians. So the residents of the ECCFPD service area represent only about one-eighth (12.35 percent) of Sen. Glazer's district.

It is clear that Sen. Glazer is not acting to address or improve the public safety emergency involving his constituents of the ECCFPD service area.

Bryan Scott is Co-Chair of East County Voters for Equal Protection, a non-partisan citizen's action committee striving to improve funding for the ECCFPD. He can be reached at scott.bryan@comcast.net, or 925-418-4428. The group's Facebook page is <https://www.facebook.com/EastCountyVoters/>.



Published February 21st, 2018

MOFD denies monetary claim from former fire chief

By *Nick Marnell*

The Moraga-Orinda Fire District board voted to reject damage claims of former Fire Chief Pete Nowicki, who had his \$20,076 monthly pension lowered by the district retirement plan manager because it claimed that Nowicki's retirement benefits had been improperly calculated.

Nowicki retired on Feb. 1, 2009, and in September 2015, the chief learned that the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association demanded that he repay \$586,000, plus interest, in pension overpayments and began deducting \$9,227 monthly from his retirement benefit. CCCERA plans to continue the adjustment until May 2022, when Nowicki's monthly benefit will be permanently reduced to \$14,296. In his filing against the district, Nowicki stated that "the reduction of my monthly retirement benefits has been and continues to be a breach (of) my employment agreement with the Fire District." He requested that the district repay all past and future pension deductions, plus other charges including legal expenses.

A federal court dismissed Nowicki's cause of action in June, and the Contra Costa Superior Court ruled against his claim in October, citing that the case had not been filed on time. The court also failed to determine how MOFD caused CCCERA to deprive Nowicki of his due process rights by reducing his pension, nor did the court find any breach of employment agreement between Nowicki and MOFD.

The district rejected Nowicki's complaint in January on similar grounds. "It wasn't the district that reduced Nowicki's pension, it was CCCERA," said district counsel Jonathan Holtzman.

Neither Nowicki nor his lawyer, Peter Janiak, would comment on the decision, nor would they discuss any future course of action.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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KQED

Will California's Water Wars Create A Constitutional Conundrum?



Soapy water flows into a drain at Divisadero Touchless Car Wash on March 20, 2015 in San Francisco, California. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

By [Amel Ahmed](#) February 23, 2018

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With nearly half the state [back in drought](#), California's water regulator held a contentious hearing in Sacramento on Tuesday on whether to make permanent the temporary water bans enacted by Governor Jerry Brown during the 2014-2017 drought.

The board announced it will revisit the proposed measures in March while it makes some minor revisions to the draft proposals.

Some of the proposed measures [relate to restrictions](#) against over watering lawns; hosing down driveways and sidewalks; washing vehicles with hoses not equipped with a shut-off nozzle; and running non-recirculated water in an ornamental fountain. Certain exceptions would apply for public health and safety reasons or commercial agricultural purposes.

'Lost in these debates is the understanding that water is a different kind of property right.'

The Water Resources Control Board, which wants to make these rules permanent, holds that even though the measures were passed in a time of emergency they should be understood as part of a broader effort to make conservation a way of life in the [drought-prone state](#).



A worker uses a hose to wash the sidewalk in front of a residential hotel on July 15, 2014 in San Francisco, California. (*Justin Sullivan/Getty Images*)

Water Board Chairwoman Felicia Marcus said that climate change is causing more frequent and longer droughts in California. She pointed to the Sierra Nevada snowpack, which remains at levels well below the average. The Sierra snowpack, a source of about a third of the state's water supply, is [currently at 22 percent](#) of the long term average for early February.

“This is why making conservation in California a way of life is so important,” said Marcus. “The Sierra water content shows we are worse off than we were three years ago, at the peak of the drought.”

Only “Reasonable” Use

But the proposed rules, which would carry fines of up to \$500 per violation, faced strong push back from some water agencies who accuse the regulatory board [of a power grab](#).

The issue, opponents say, is constitutional. The California Constitution contains a provision that prohibits the “waste or unreasonable use” of water.

Water administrators fear that the board is going to rely on the constitutional provision to erode the water rights belonging to California landowners.

“Erratic individuals can occupy great positions of power in government, and you had better believe they will occupy your chair someday,” said Jackson Minasian, an attorney for Stanford Vina Ranch Irrigation Co. “Their view of what is ‘waste and unreasonable use’ will be radically different than yours.”

Jeff Stephenson, of the San Diego County Water Authority, said the proposal marks an unauthorized expansion of the water board's authority.

“The board appears intent on expanding and exceeding its jurisdictional authority on this matter and several others,” said Stephenson.

The board pushed back however, arguing that it was operating within its statutory authority to prevent [wasteful water](#) uses.

“We feel confident that the board is acting squarely within its authority,” said David Rose, Water Board staff counsel. “We made sure specific uses were being addressed and that they would not impact water rights.”



Sprinklers water the lawn in Golden Gate Park on April 2, 2015 in San Francisco, California. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Rose added that water banned for use in one area, could always be put to another use.

“Prohibiting these specific discreet, wasteful and unreasonable water uses would allow suppliers, water users and water rights holders to use any amount of water that they couldn’t use . . . on a reasonable and beneficial use,” he said.

Water: Private or Public Right?

Richard M. Frank, director of the [California Environmental Law & Policy Center](#) at UC Davis, says that lost in these debates is the understanding that water is a different kind of property right, compared to for example owning a car or home.

“It’s a limited property right, which is something that is lost on a lot of people in the ongoing California debate on water. The courts have long held that water is owned by the public, and that is also embedded in California statutes. “

Private parties who seek to appropriate water have since 1914 had to first obtain a license from the state to use water and that license is subject to restrictions, he said.

“The most important of these restrictions is the constitutional provision stating that all water use must be ‘reasonable,’” Frank said. “And the state can limit, ban, and penalize unreasonable uses of water.”



Water officials say people often forget to turn off lawn sprinklers when it starts raining. (iStock/Getty Images)

Heather Welles, an attorney who works on water rights at the law firm [O'Melveny in Los Angeles](#), says the courts have been pretty deferential to the board's authority to identify specific practices as wasteful or unreasonable. And in this case, the board has provided safeguards within the proposed regulations to allow water users to protest a citation.

"As a general matter, if the board is going to take action that limits specific water rights, it would have to engage in a process that would give water rights holders the ability to dispute the grounds," said Welles.

"Here, the proposed regulations incorporate a process by which if the board is actually issuing a notice or penalty, then the water user may request a hearing before the board and, of course, seek judicial review."

Frank noted that if Governor Brown declares another drought emergency, the move will only strengthen the board's hand.

"The board will have broader legal authority than it has now," he said.

And as the state plunges back into drought, just months after emerging from the last one, permanent water restrictions in California may be eminent.

"We're not in an emergency right now, but shame on us if we just bury our heads in the sand," Marcus, Water Board Chairwoman, [told](#) the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*.

Legal observers expect a protracted battle ahead.

Los Angeles Times

Alarming dry conditions in California setting new records

By [Rong-Gong Lin II](#)

Feb 23, 2018 | 7:25 AM

California is headed to a dry finish to February, historically one of the state's wettest months.

The state has been getting cold storms in recent days, which have been responsible for plunging temperatures, but the systems have been dry because they've been coming inland, north from Canada, instead of over the Pacific Ocean, where they can soak up moisture.

"The West Coast is under what we call the Arctic Express — and so it's cold, but it's dry," climatologist Bill Patzert said. "Whether it's warm or cold, the rain story is the same, and here in Southern California, there's been scattered showers, but downtown L.A. hasn't seen more than a trace.

"We don't see any white horse charging on the horizon to change what's been a pretty disappointing rain year," Patzert said.

In fact, this month could be one for the record books as far as the driest February, or one of the driest, on record. Sacramento has received no rain at all this month; its record for driest February was in 1899, when the state's capital recorded 0.04 inch of rain

Driest Februaries		
Redding, CA 2018 so far 0.00"	Sacramento, CA 2018 so far 0.00"	Stockton, CA 2018 so far 0.00"
1. 0.41" 1971	1. 0.04" 1899	1. 0.06" 1953
2. 0.58" 2013	2. 0.16" 1913	2. 0.21" 2013
3. 0.72" 1997	3. 0.19" 1995	3. 0.29" 1997
4. 0.75" 1953 & 1967	4. 0.21" 1953	4. 0.33" 1967
5. 0.88" 1955	5. 0.26" 1997 & 2013	5. 0.38" 1995
Paradise, CA 2018 so far 0.00"	Modesto, CA 2018 so far 0.00"	Blue Canyon, CA 2018 so far 0.01"
1. 0.29" 1967	1. 0.07" 1953	1. 0.64" 2013
2. 0.39" 1997	2. 0.08" 1997	2. 1.05" 1967
3. 0.66" 1971	3. 0.10" 1913	3. 1.33" 2015
4. 1.36" 2013	4. 0.21" 1967	4. 1.44" 1953
5. 1.95" 1965	5. 0.32" 2013	5. 2.16" 1971

After most sites had above average rainfall in January, February has turned bone dry. Despite the chance of spotty showers from a couple of weather systems for the rest of this month, rainfall for the month of February looks as if it will end up to be (well) below normal.

San Francisco recorded its first measurable rain of the month on Thursday, but the city got only 0.01 inch; it typically gets about 4 inches in February.

The last time L.A. had no rain in February was in 1933, Patzert said; Los Angeles, however, has recorded 0.01 inch of rain so far this month. If downtown L.A. gets no more rain this month, this year's January-February period could be among the top three driest in the record books.

"What we've been having recently are these showers here and there. There's just not much moisture," said Jayme Laber, hydrologist with the National Weather Service's Oxnard office.

The conditions in the Sierra Nevada, California's greatest mountain range, have been dismal. The [water content of the Lake Tahoe basin snowpack](#) is just 20% of average for this time of year. At one station at Fallen Leaf, at elevation 6,242 feet, the land is dry and the snowpack is at 0% of normal. Farther up, at Heavenly Valley at 8,534 feet above sea level, the snowpack is at 47% of normal, said meteorologist Scott McGuire of the National Weather Service office in Reno.

Even the cold storms that have come through the Sierra recently have "all been fairly insignificant," McGuire said. "They have not been major contributors to the snowpack at all."

The snowpack stored in the Sierra Nevada over the winter is an important source for California's water supply.

Yosemite Ski & Snowboard Area announced it will not open this winter. "Unfortunately, there is not enough snow right now, or in the near forecast to open," the area said in a [statement](#) Wednesday. "We are contacting all season pass holders via email to offer the option of a season pass roll over to the 2018-19 season or a refund."

The recent weather pattern is a flip to the weather pattern that has seen California basking in a hot winter and the Midwest and East Coast shivering from frigid air. Now, a mass of high pressure is no longer affecting California and is instead now in place to the East, which is now seeing record high temperatures.

On Wednesday, it was 78 degrees at New York City's Central Park and 82 at Washington's Reagan National Airport. Records for the day fell again on Thursday in the southeast, with Charlotte, N.C., hitting 80, and Roanoke, Va., topping out at 84.

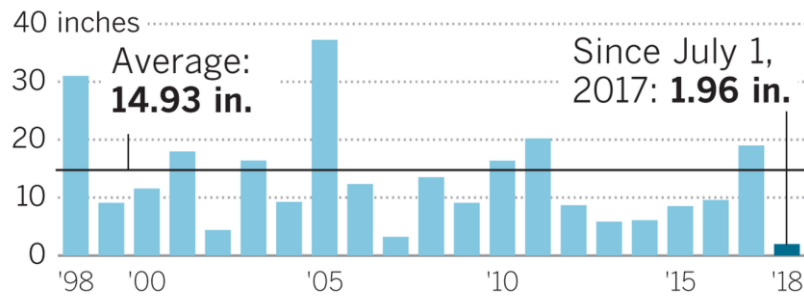
Record low temperatures for the date have been seen in the Bay Area, with Gilroy dipping to 30 on Wednesday and 27 in Napa a day earlier.

Farmers earlier this week feared that freezing temperatures [could possibly endanger](#) California's almond and other lucrative Central Valley crops.

This winter's lackluster rain season demonstrates how in some respects, it may have been premature for Californians to celebrate the end of the drought. Patzert said a look at the last 20 years of rainfall in downtown L.A. shows that, counting this year, 14 of them have been below average.

Downtown L.A. rainfall

For the rain year that ends June 30:



Source: Climatologist Bill Patzert

@latimesgraphics

(Thomas Suh Lauder / Los Angeles Times)

"Last winter was a temporary respite," Patzert said. "People are too quick to call an end to the drought. Droughts don't come and go in one year...When you call an end to the drought after one wet year, that's false hope."

At the moment, another cold storm is expected to come into California on Monday and Tuesday, although at the moment it doesn't look like that system will produce much rain.

A more promising bet comes about a week from now, on March 1, when some forecast models predict the arrival of a storm that could be a decent rainmaker.

But few are holding out hope that even a March miracle could bring California to the average annual precipitation level.

"It's virtually impossible to end up at average snowpack by April 1," McGuire said.

ron.lin@latimes.com

[@ronlin](#)

California Could Upend City Building Rules in Bid to Make Housing Cheaper

Housing prices in California continue to soar, in part because many cities have discouraged dense development. That's led to a big fight in Sacramento over whether the state should force cities to allow apartment and condo buildings near transit stations.

BY: [Daniel C. Vock](#) | February 26, 2018

Frustrated with cities that repeatedly block dense development, one California state senator has set off a huge debate by proposing that the state should sweep aside local restrictions to allow more concentrated housing near major transit stations.

Astronomically high housing costs have long plagued California, and the problem has only grown worse in recent years, particularly for Southern California and the Bay Area. Housing prices statewide are up 74 percent since their lowest point in the Great Recession, according to [Zillow](#). The average home in California in 2015 [cost](#) two-and-a-half times the national average, and California's average monthly rents were 50 percent higher than the rest of the country. Half of Californians said affordable housing was an "extremely serious" problem in a [poll](#) last year, and a quarter of respondents said they had thought of moving out of the state because of it.

But the proposal from Scott Wiener, the state senator who represents all of San Francisco, goes beyond the traditional housing fights. It would be an overt act of state preemption in a blue state, at a time when Democrats routinely criticize Republican leaders in red states for overriding their local control. By doing so, state lawmakers would essentially be blaming local governments for stymying development, pushing up housing prices and forcing residents to commute for hours to find affordable housing.

More than that, it would be a loud declaration that the California of [Silicon Valley office parks](#), vast freeways and bucolic suburban neighborhoods should give way to a more crowded, centrally controlled and environmentally conscious future. It would be an admission that spreading out is not always the answer to high housing prices, and that it may even be part of the problem. And it would clear the way for development to thrive along major transit routes the same way it seems to naturally spring up along highways.

Wiener says the state needs to step in because localities now have basically unlimited power over what kind of housing gets built and where. Most local governments, he adds, have misused that power to serve parochial interests rather than the goals of the whole state, which include reducing carbon dioxide emissions, promoting diversity, and promoting shared prosperity.

"Every city or town acts as if it lives in its own universe. There's always an incentive for people to say they don't want more density here. They love that they can live across from the transit station in a single-family house. They love that their neighborhood by the BART [the Bay Area's subway system] station has the small town feel," Wiener says.

"But when you look statewide, the impact of low-density zoning around transit stations is huge. It pushes people to move further and further away," he adds, because demand forces prices up for the limited number of housing units nearby. Those longer commutes lead to worse traffic, more pollution and a host of other problems.

Some prominent city leaders have backed Wiener's legislation. San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo supports it, and Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf and Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg have been receptive. On Friday night, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said he's "all for" Wiener's bill, so long as it includes protections

against demolishing existing rent-controlled units near transit stations.

But many cities see it as a direct challenge to their authority. Berkeley Mayor Jesse Arreguín called it “a declaration of war against our neighborhoods.”

The California League of Cities opposes what it calls “another housing bill that takes away local discretion and authority.”

California lawmakers passed a package of 15 laws last year designed to alleviate the housing crisis. The package included new money to help build low-income housing, more latitude for cities to impose affordable housing requirements on new developments, and imposes new requirements on cities to promote the construction of new residences.

One of those new laws, also sponsored by Wiener, allows developers who build multiunit housing to bypass certain local government reviews in areas that have fallen behind their state-mandated housing goals. Ninety-seven percent of localities fell short of at least some of those goals, which means they will be subject to streamlining requirements.

But Wiener says more changes are needed. “Our job is not done,” he says. “We didn’t deal with this issue of low-density zoning around transit.”

The League of Cities, though, warns that Wiener’s current proposal, [Senate Bill 827](#), would “give developers and transit agencies, who are unaccountable at the local level, the power to exempt themselves from locally developed and adopted building height limitations, densities, parking requirements and design review standards.”

In its current form, Wiener’s legislation would affect neighborhoods within a half-mile of a major transit stop or a quarter mile from a major transit corridor. Developments in those areas would be exempt from local regulations on residential density, maximum floor area ratio and parking minimums. It would also preempt height restrictions lower than 45 feet to 85 feet, depending on the characteristics of the street.

The bill is still in its introductory stage and California lawmakers won’t take it up until they start committee work next month. It would likely take months before it could reach the governor’s desk, and it is likely to be amended as it moves forward.

But the proposal has already attracted an inordinate amount of attention for a bill in such an early stage.

The Sierra Club, for example, has weighed in against it, because it preempts local ordinances. Other states, it notes, have used the same tactic to prevent cities from enacting affordable housing mandates for developers.

“This bill has the right aim, but the wrong method,” said Lindi von Mutius, Sierra Club chief of staff, in a [statement](#). “We know that some members of the legislature are working to refine the bill to make it less damaging in approach. We hope they are successful, because we need more transit-oriented development that is appropriately sited to ensure smart, walkable communities that improve quality of life, reduce pollution, and fight climate change.”

Act LA, a Los Angeles-area coalition that works on affordable housing and transit access issues, also came out against the proposal. The group points out that Los Angeles has passed several programs to encourage developers to build affordable housing, and it says the new proposal could undermine those efforts with “an open the floodgates approach” toward building new housing.

“It is clear that in the City of Los Angeles, SB 827 will exacerbate the very issue it seeks to remedy, especially in low-income communities and communities of color,” it explained in a [letter](#) to Wiener.

Wiener is trying to address those concerns and will likely file amendments this week to try to ensure that the state program doesn’t interfere with local affordable-housing initiatives.

But the measure has gathered a lot of support, too. More than 120 of the state's tech leaders are backing the legislation, because they say high housing costs makes it difficult for them to attract workers to their California operations.

"The housing shortage places a huge burden on workers, many of whom face punishingly long commutes and pay over half of their incomes on rent," they wrote in a letter to Wiener, as first [reported](#) by the *Los Angeles Times*.

"Caltrain and BART receive significant state funding and are the backbones of our regional transit infrastructure," they added, "and yet these systems are not able to realize their full potential because too few people are able to take advantage of them to shorten their commutes."

Wiener cautions that, even if his bill takes effect, it will take a while before neighborhoods start changing. "This will play out over years and decades," he says, but it's vital for the future. "California has always been a beacon to the world, where people want to come. We want to keep it that way, but housing threatens that."

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Water Deeply

Californians Are Struggling to Pay for Rising Water Rates

Water rates are rising in many California communities faster than some residents can keep up. While the state works to come up with a plan to tackle affordability issues, one bill seeks to protect against water shutoffs.

Written by [Alastair Bland](#) Published on σ Feb. 27, 2018 Read time Approx. 5 minutes



The Owens River Aqueduct system near Los Angeles. The series of pipelines and constructed rivers divert and transport water via gravity into the city of Los Angeles from more than 230 miles away. Upgrades to infrastructure projects are driving up water rates in many California cities, including Los Angeles. *Ted Soqui/Corbis via Getty Images*

California has been blessed with the distinction of being home to some of the richest and the poorest income-earning Americans, according to a 2015 [report](#) by the Social Science Research Council. This stark division of wealth between the extravagantly rich and the destitute is displayed vividly in how the state's residents consume water. On the one hand, some estate owners have been publicly shamed for watering their lawns during extreme drought with thousands of gallons per day – sometimes five or 10 times the average household rate. While other Californians live in communities where there isn't enough water or the [water isn't safe to drink](#).

But it's not just access to water that's a problem, it's also the cost. Many California residents, in both small towns and big cities, are struggling to keep up with the rising price of water. The State Water Resources Control Board has been tasked with coming up with a plan to tackle affordability, but it's been slow going.

Max Gomberg, the State Water Resources Control Board's climate and conservation manager, says the price of water has increased at six times the rate of inflation across the state. Gomberg's agency is currently drafting a set of recommendations that will help the state legislature develop a financial assistance program for residents with soaring water rates. The water board, which already missed a February 1 deadline on the task, aims to submit the guidelines this year, though Gomberg says the legislature is not required to follow them.

Water prices are rising in California for a variety of reasons. For one thing, much of the state is either a desert or is dominated by an arid Mediterranean climate, so water is naturally scarce. Because water must often be obtained from distant sources, large infrastructure projects are necessary – and much of this infrastructure is aging. Gomberg says many water agencies are catching up on deferred maintenance of pipes, pumps and wells and passing associated costs on to their customers. In some districts, water has become contaminated and must be treated – another cost that gets distributed through residential water bills.

“But one of the big drivers is climate change,” Gomberg says. “Climate change is making hydrology more variable. We're having longer droughts and warmer hot spells. Water districts that could once rely on rain and reliable groundwater reserves no longer can.”

In the small San Joaquin Valley communities of Cantua Creek and El Porvenir, hundreds of residents are paying above-average rates for water that they cannot even safely drink. It's a situation that Erica Fernandez Zamora, a policy advocate with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, says violates the California [Human Right to Water](#) law of 2012, which states that, “every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable and accessible water.”

Cantua Creek and El Porvenir both receive water from Fresno County via Westlands Water District, a wealthy agricultural region that obtains water from the federal Central Valley Project run by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The 2012–16 drought affected supplies, forcing Westlands to pay more. In turn, the 600 residents of Cantua Creek and El Porvenir were faced with rate increases, which the communities of mostly low-income farm workers didn't believe they could pay. Rates were \$110 a month in El Porvenir and \$72 a month in Cantua Creek for water that the state deemed unsafe. Facing water shutoffs, the state stepped in with emergency funds to reduce costs and provide bottled water, but the grants expire this spring.

“We're trying to find permanent solutions for these people,” Zamora says.

But the San Joaquin Valley isn't the only area where water affordability is a problem.

According to the water news agency [Circle of Blue](#), between 2010 and 2017 water rates in Los Angeles jumped 71 percent. The biggest increase was for households of four that used 100 gallons per capita a day, which saw monthly water bills increase from \$58.49 to \$100.14. In San Francisco water rates increased 119–127 percent (depending on usage) during the same period. Bills increased from \$86.31 to \$195.86 a month for a household of four using 150 gallons per person a day. For those using only 50 gallons per person a day, rates jumped \$30.63 to \$67.07. Both cities have undertaken costly infrastructure upgrades.

Even in relatively affluent smaller communities, the cost of water has escalated, too. The wine country town of St. Helena in the Napa Valley, which is grappling with infrastructure upgrades, is one example.

“Our rates are now two-and-a-half times those in the city of Napa,” says Geoff Ellsworth, a member of the St. Helena City Council.

State senator Bill Dodd, a Democrat from Napa, recently introduced legislation that would make it more difficult for utilities to abruptly discontinue service for customers unable to pay their water bills. Currently, he says, cell-phone companies face tighter restrictions in cutting off services than do water agencies.

The water board reports that the state spends more than \$2.5 billion per year to aid low-income residents with gas, electric and telecommunication services, but more than half the state’s residents have a water provider that doesn’t offer rate assistance for low-income customers.

Dodd’s proposed law, Senate Bill 998, seeks to model California’s water deliveries more like electricity and phone services, where failure to pay bills may result in soft enforcement – first warnings, followed by opportunities to appeal and probably fines. Only as a last resort, he explains, do phone and electricity providers terminate service.

But Dodd says that with water service, missing a due date on a payment can mean dry taps in just days. His proposed law would prohibit service cuts for at least 60 days if a customer fails to pay a bill. It would require advanced written warning that service might be discontinued and would prohibit cutting of water supplies for the ill or elderly if a local health agency determines doing so would seriously threaten their health.

The bill, which is currently pending in the Senate, would also provide clear instructions to help people in restoring discontinued service and would waive reconnection fees for low-income households.

Dodd says many of the poorest Californians are paying as much as a fifth of their incomes for water. In the East Bay Municipal Utility District alone, which provides drinking water for 1.4 million people, household water deliveries were interrupted for more than 8,000 residences in 2015 due to unpaid bills, according to a press release from his office. In July 2017, the utility’s board voted to increase rates 19 percent over two years.

California is served by more than 400 large public water agencies. Additionally, many people receive water from private wells or small water systems. This decentralized system makes providing water for all in an equitable way a difficult task.

When it comes to the state’s Right to Water law, “It’s great to have this right written on paper, but it’s more important to have that right realized,” says Dodd.

The Dangerous Return of Water Privatization

Community waters systems have sustainably provided safe drinking water for generations but corporations are now using local fiscal crises to push for water privatization.

By Maude Barlow and Wenonah Hauter, from Sojourners
Utne Reader, March 2, 2018

The United States has one of the best public water supply systems in the world. More than 250 million people count on local governments to provide safe drinking water. Over the last 40 years, federal, state, and municipal governments have worked together to improve and protect water resources. The Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act have kept the U.S. on target for preserving rivers, lakes, watersheds, wetlands, natural aquifers, and other sources of fresh water.

Great strides have been made in managing waste water and storm water. More than 90 percent of community water systems in 2012 met all federal health standards. Public water utilities have been a tremendously successful model for the U.S. and continue to keep drinking water safe, accessible, and affordable for all Americans.

It hasn't always been this way.

During the 1800s, private companies controlled the water systems of several large U.S. cities—to dire effect. Because the companies were more interested in making a profit than providing good service, many poor residents lacked access to water. As a result, cholera outbreaks were common in poor neighborhoods; water pressure was sometimes too low to stop fires, which destroyed both homes and businesses.

By the turn of the 20th century, city governments, including Baltimore, Boston, New Orleans, and New York City, had taken over drinking water provision from private companies. The goal of government was to improve service, reduce waterborne diseases, and increase water pressure to better fight fires. New York City, for example, assumed control of its drinking water services from the bank and holding company called the Manhattan Company, the predecessor of JPMorgan Chase, after an outbreak of cholera killed 3,500 people and a devastating fire caused extensive property damage.

These cities learned the hard way just how important public water provision is for human and environmental health. The shift to a public utility system, responsive to community needs, allowed local public control of water and sewer services. Public utilities helped local

governments manage water resources, growth, and development, and ensured that safe and reliable services were available to all.

Now, just past the turn of the 21st century, our national water framework needs rethinking with climate change and sustainability in mind. It's time for an integrated, holistic national water policy, including the establishment of a federal water trust fund. Instead we face the cannibalization of our public utilities by private corporations.

Despite our success over the last 100 years, public water utilities face daunting challenges in the days ahead:

1. Water systems nationwide are aging and wearing out. Last summer more than 150,000 residents in the greater Washington, D.C. region faced the specter of being without water for days because of a stuck valve on a major water main. Delayed maintenance on the valve due to funding cuts led to the crisis.

There are 237,600 water line-related breaks in the United States each year, resulting in \$2.8 billion lost in potential revenue and tax dollars annually. An influx of money is needed for repairs and replacements to prevent leaks and to maintain reliable service. In total, U.S. drinking water systems will need \$384 billion in improvements over the next 20 years to continue to provide safe water, according to the EPA.

2. As water needs rise, federal funding dwindles. With a U.S. population of more than 316 million, the need for clean water continues to grow. Yet water systems are among the first on the chopping block during congressional budget battles. From 1977 to 2009, federal funding for water and sewer systems fell by 75 percent (after accounting for inflation). Following a brief respite from the 2009 national stimulus, federal water funding continues its downward trajectory. Cuts in federal funding shift a greater financial burden to local governments. Local governments are still grappling with budget shortfalls carried over from the recession.

3. Enter climate change into this equation. Climate change may pose a serious risk to water supplies in about 70 percent of U.S. counties—a third of these counties will be at high or extreme risk of water shortages. Warmer temperatures worsen water pollution and cause more extreme weather events. As we saw with Hurricane Sandy, extreme weather can destroy water facilities and infrastructure, with seawater seeping into reservoirs. Climate change will continue to stress water supplies and create water shortages.

But sustainable water management isn't just about our water infrastructure. Every well developed for fracking uses 3 to 5 million gallons of water as part of the process. According to some estimates, 20 percent of that water can be reused for more fracking, but 80 percent is highly salinized wastewater.

All these problems intersect to create the Great American Water Crisis.

Whenever a crisis arises there are those who battle it and, unfortunately, those who take advantage of it for personal gain. Private water corporations and investment banks once again are

stepping in to take advantage of this crisis through takeovers and buyouts of public water systems. The aggressive strategy of private water utility companies in the last 10 years raises fears that the public may be losing control of its most vital resource.

These corporations work to undermine federal funding for public utilities, while seeking special tax benefits and government subsidies for themselves. They target local governments with offers of upfront cash in exchange for long-term control of water resources. Currently, about 12 percent of the U.S. population receives water service from privately owned community water systems. These private water providers, which include both nonprofit associations and for-profit companies, primarily serve subdivisions and areas outside municipal limits.

In many ways, water privatization can leave poor households high and dry. Private water utilities are businesses, and like any business they are accountable first and foremost to their owners. As a result, their primary objectives are often different than those of a local government, which is accountable to constituents and voters. This impacts decisions about where to extend service and the price and quality of that service.

As a matter of public policy, a city seeks to provide water service to every neighborhood within its borders and may aim to keep water rates as affordable as possible. Private companies, however, base their decisions on profitability. When they expand water service areas, they tend to exclude households with the greatest need. Private companies are prone to cherry-pick service areas to avoid low-income communities where low water use and frequent bill collection problems can hurt earnings. Instead, private companies may enter into deals with real estate developers to provide water service to new suburban developments, which can promote urban sprawl.

When private players take over public water systems, prices typically increase much faster than inflation. In general, compared to local governments, for-profit water utilities charge customers considerably higher prices. On average, private financing costs one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half times as much as public financing, translating into higher rates for consumers. A survey of the largest water utilities in the Great Lakes region, for example, found that privately owned systems charged households more than twice as much as municipal systems charged for the same amount of water. The researchers attributed this difference to private companies' profits, rate-making practices, higher overall service costs, and taxes.

Water prices are regressive. When households are unable to pay for service, private players usually respond by cutting existing connections. This deprives low-income households of their human right to water, with potentially disastrous health and social welfare consequences.

Water privatization may also interfere with local government efforts to prepare for climate change and protect water supplies. Sustainable management of water resources requires coordination across government divisions and jurisdictions in a watershed, but private utilities have no incentive or requirement to participate in integrated water management programs. Private companies are in the business of making money, not delivering clean water at the lowest cost.

Despite these dangers, some local governments continue to fall prey to the quick-fix and budget gimmicks proffered by privatization advocates.

The good news is that faith-based, consumer, labor, and other community organizations have teamed up to fend off many attempted takeovers to keep their water under local public control, for the health of the poorest and the strength of the whole community. A few examples:

In February 2008, Akron's Mayor Don Plusquellic ended his State of the City address with a proposal to lease the city's sewers to private interests under the guise of raising money for a scholarship program. Greg Coleridge, director of the Economic Justice and Empowerment Program at the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee, responded quickly. He brought together stakeholders throughout the city to form a broad coalition of labor, faith, and community organizations known as Citizens to Save Our Sewers and Water, or Citizens SOS.

Citizens SOS decided that the best way to counter the mayor's proposal was to require voter approval before the privatization of any public utility. To do this, they needed to pass a ballot referendum. They had to collect enough signatures to get their proposal on the November 2008 ballot, then educate voters about the issue.

In May 2008, Citizens SOS kick-started its petition drive with a community meeting attended by more than 150 people. With this auspicious beginning, they had no trouble collecting the necessary signatures to get their issue on the ballot. Next, Citizens SOS educated their constituency about privatization and countered Plusquellic's aggressive campaign promoting his own ballot initiative to authorize the lease.

On Election Day 2008, with a county-wide voter turnout of more than 70 percent, Akron overwhelmingly rejected privatization and overwhelmingly supported the public's right to have a voice in what happens to their utilities, by a margin of two-to-one. "It's just a wonderful collective victory with so many people having a role that was so powerful," Coleridge told Food and Water Watch after the victory.

Plusquellic was not alone in his misguided quest to privatize public services, but community groups around the country continue to organize to keep their water in public hands.

In 2008, the comptroller of Milwaukee suggested leasing its water utility to a corporation for 75 to 99 years in exchange for a one-time cash infusion to help fund city operations. By June 2009, a broad coalition named Keep Public Our Water (KPOW) helped shelve the lease of Milwaukee's water system.

In 2010, a Trenton community coalition beat back the proposed sale of part of their city's water system to American Water. A resounding 80 percent of voters rejected the deal, even though the water company spent more than \$1 million to curry their favor, nearly 32 times as much as the stop-the-sale campaign.

In 2011, community organizing stopped privatization deals in Franklin Township, New Jersey, and Muskogee, Oklahoma. In 2012, the city council of Grand Island, Nebraska, unanimously

rejected a waste-water privatization deal with Veolia Water because of public opposition. In 2013, residents of Bethel, Connecticut, soundly defeated a proposal to sell their water system to Aquarion Water Company. More than 70 percent of voters rejected the sale.

Because water is fundamental to life and human dignity, the United Nations has recognized access to safe water and sanitation as a basic human right. Involving private enterprises in water operations can conflict with the human right to water. It is up to consumer groups, civil society, and faith communities to stop corporate takeovers of public water systems established for the common good to ensure universal access to safe water.

Together, we can protect our water supplies in the face of growing challenges. We can establish a federal water trust fund to provide dedicated monies for our water and sewer systems; we can ban fracking to protect our water resources; and we can enshrine the human right to water in federal and state law. Responsible public provision of our water and sewer services, along with these three policy steps, is the best way to safeguard water, uphold the human right to water, make sure that no one suffers from lack of this essential element, and move our country toward a sustainable integrated national water policy.

Water is the lifeblood of our communities. It is essential for health and well-being. Its substance is beyond value and transcends the physical—it's sacred. Let us cherish—and protect—this precious resource.

Maude Barlow is a cofounder of the Blue Planet Project and board chair of Food and Water Watch. Wenonah Hauter is executive director of Food and Water Watch. Reprinted from [Sojourners](#) (November 2013), a monthly Christian magazine on a mission to integrate spiritual renewal and social justice.



Published March 7th, 2018

ConFire chooses general contractor for Fire Station 16

By *Nick Marnell*

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Assistant Chief Aaron McAlister announced that D.L. Falk Construction of Hayward submitted the winning bid for the Lafayette Fire Station 16 construction project. Falk's bid came in at \$3.43 million, just under the \$3.5 million estimate, a minor miracle of sorts considering the sky-high construction costs in the Bay Area. Five other bidders were prequalified by the county, but only Falk submitted a number.

ConFire has four fire stations in various stages of construction or design, but because of its small size and location, Fire Station 16 will be the only station of the four with a back-in apparatus bay. The district prefers a drive-through bay because it lessens the probability of damage to its trucks and engines. "This station will not become a future ConFire template," McAlister said at the Feb. 26 Advisory Fire Commission meeting. The general contractor appeared undaunted by the unique specifications of the Lafayette fire station. "We've built fire stations the size of a house, within a housing development," said Greg Schmidt, Falk director of operations. Schmidt said the company has also built a fire station in San Jose with a back-in apparatus bay. The formal award of the bid for Fire Station 16 should occur at the March board of directors meeting. Kitchell Northern California remains the station construction manager.

Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

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Published March 7th, 2018

New MOFD chief tackles a longstanding Orinda problem

By Nick Marnell



MOFD aides Connor Rowan, left, and Pete Stathakos conduct hydrant testing in north Orinda. Photo MOFD

Rehnstrom, EBMUD manager of water distribution.

Fire Chief Dave Winnacker outlined his plans to maximize the available water supply in north Orinda and to mitigate the hazards presented by the area's wildland terrain at the Feb. 21 meeting of the Moraga-Orinda Fire District. The chief's presentation made clear that the district, whose hands have been tied by financial limitations, outside agency policies and voter indifference, will focus on what it can do, rather than complain about or remain hostage to what other parties say they cannot or will not do.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District, which owns most of the fire hydrants and water infrastructure in the fire district, replaces underground pipes on its own terms, on its own timetable. "EBMUD will not, as the only participating agency, undertake system modifications solely to improve fire flow," the district states in its Fire Flow Improvement Program. Since 1999, the water district has replaced 19 miles of the 130 miles of underground pipe in Orinda, according to David

Studies concluded that \$50 million was needed to update the inadequate piping infrastructure, which Orinda voters declined to fund via three different ballot measures. So Winnacker began the search for the worst of the worst of underperforming north Orinda hydrants by doing fire flow measurements with EBMUD, which will insert the calculations into a shared database. MOFD will test 15 hydrants per week, with hydrants flowing at less than 500 gallons per minute as the top priorities. "Once these are completed, we will have an updated report on where the problems are," the chief said.

Concurrently, MOFD will prominently label acceptable water sources, so that when outside agencies flood into the area to help fight a major fire, suppression personnel will be able to easily identify reliable water sources. The district will also identify supplemental water sources, like pools and ponds, privately maintained water tanks, and water supplies along Bear Creek Road and the Briones Reservoir.

The second part of Winnacker's plan features heightened levels of fire mitigation. A wildfire spreading down from the Bear Creek Road and Briones areas is a major threat to north Orinda, and noting that the best fire attack is fire prevention, the chief said the district will quarterback the efforts of wildland fire mitigation among various agencies and private citizen groups.

EBMUD owns open space adjacent to north Orinda, PG&E owns several large parcels in north Orinda and the county road maintenance crews are responsible for maintaining the shoulder of Bear Creek Road. Winnacker said that the district will assist the agencies to make sure that mitigation efforts are reinforced and complementary, such as arranging for the Cal Fire Delta Crew to trim back vegetation in the Bear Creek area. The chief noted that, though often not popular, the PG&E tree trimming efforts have real value for fire prevention.

MOFD will also coordinate efforts of neighborhood groups to carry out fuel mitigation efforts, and will encourage homeowner associations to create safe, defensible spaces. Notification and evacuation plans have been updated, though the chief said that an early warning is needed for a wildfire that starts on the north side of the ridge.

"We want to identify things we can do now within our existing budget, utilizing and leveraging people's money through the grant process and engaging the community to buy in to everything they can do to prevent a catastrophic wildfire from spreading," Winnacker said. The chief pledged that, though north Orinda has been identified as the No. 1 target area, the water flow and mitigation programs will eventually be rolled out into the rest of the district.

Dick Olsen, a former MOFD director and a revered founding father of the fire district, praised the chief's attempt to fix a problem that has frustrated the district since its 1997 inception. "This is way beyond what anybody else has ever done," Olsen told the board.