



Going with the flow California lives or dies with water -- whether it's snowpack, tap or bottled.

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AFTER A BIG WINTER storm, I always like to check out a little something I call the "we're all gonna die" risk level.

It's measured by the depth of the Sierra Nevada snowpack, the source of most California drinking water. As the snowpack goes, so goes the state. And with global warming what it is, it should be pretty well gone by the next century.

I called the state water resources people in Sacramento. The guy who took my message said he'd just been snowboarding over the weekend and the snowpack looked excellent.

Wouldn't it be great, I said, if Californians kept an eye on the snowpack the way they do "American Idol," and he said that'd make him very happy indeed.

Later, I got a less colorful but more precise assessment from Frank Gehrke, snow surveys chief, who said that with the snowpack at above-average depth, it looks like a "very good March so far."

Could I stop fretting now? No. When the snowpack is shallow, I worry. But when it's deep, I worry more, because it's just like us to get all cocky and go off on an H₂O binge and drink and shower and flush ourselves dry. The truth is, we're using it up — or dirtying it up — at a fast clip, but like real estate, they're not making it anymore.

Why are we so cavalier about the water supply? Why do we believe the scientists — or the snowpack — will invariably bail us out? It's what comes of seeing too many TV shows in which disaster is always averted between the last commercial break and the previews of next week's episode.

The story on Page 1 says NASA may have found geysers on a moon of Saturn, and immediately it's: Oh, there's a space volcano spurting ice like a chocolate fountain at an Oscar party. Cool. Maybe Halliburton can go bring it back. Think I'll go hose down the driveway to celebrate.

You won't think the gas crisis is so bad once the water crisis kicks in. How about a "Mad Max" remake, with Mel Gibson hunting down a liter of Fiji water instead of a liter of unleaded?

That big bond measure Arnold Schwarzenegger wants so he can brag about being the infrastructure governor — if you don't see it on the ballot in June, it may be because of water. It can't get on the ballot unless the governor and two-thirds of the Legislature are onboard. But Republicans and Democrats in the Legislature are fighting over in-ground pools versus above-ground pools. No kidding. The GOP wants dams and reservoirs, and the Democrats want underground water storage.

And while they're fighting over acre feet, we're besotted with half-liters. "Tap water terror" has been marketed so effectively that everyone is packing a cellphone in one hand and a darling little water bottle in the other. This isn't Africa. We don't have to walk miles to get water and boil it when we find it.

American tap water is perfectly fine; at least a quarter of bottled water starts out as tap water anyway, and tap water is usually more rigorously tested than the higher-priced spreads. San Francisco bottled and marketed its truly tasty piped-in-from-the-Sierra tap water for \$1.25 a half-liter but, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, that didn't stop the city from laying out millions in taxpayer money for bottled water from everywhere but its own pipes.

This news made me feel better about L.A.'s water folly. As the Department of Water and Power was spending a million bucks on an ad campaign to entice people to drink tap water, it was also spending nearly \$90,000 on Sparkletts for its own gullets. The agency's defense was that much of the bottled water went to far-flung offices without the city's decent tap water, in

places like ... Owens Valley, where the irony is thicker than the alkaline dust blowing off Owens Lake.

Bottled water wouldn't be such an irritant if you people picked up after yourselves. You pay 4 cents upfront — almost a nickel — on every bottle whether you recycle it or not. A billion plastic water bottles — a billion nearly nickels — tossed away in California every year. That's, what, \$40 million? If I ever give up this gig, I plan to drive around town going through yuppie office trash. I'll be rich, 4 cents at a time.

Knowing we're hooked on bottled water, a Los Angeles man allegedly tried to get back at someone he didn't like by reporting that the fellow, an Arrowhead water employee, was putting methamphetamine — speed — in the spring water. (I am sorry to say that my first thought was, "Wow, that'd save me a lot of money on coffee.")

Times have changed. Back when we all drank out of the tap, Charles Manson's gang planned to taint water wholesale, putting belladonna — deadly nightshade — in the city's reservoirs. Now he'd have to do it in a billion bottles, a half-liter at a time. Even Charlie couldn't be crazy enough to try that.