

High and Dry in San Diego

The hot topic these days -- in the news, at the debates, even at the water cooler (pun intended) -- is water supply. The Colorado River is literally drying up due to climate change and over-allocations. A recent legal decision to protect an endangered fish (the Delta smelt) in Northern California will result in less water coming from the Delta to Southern California, while climate change conditions have reduced the Sierra snowpack, the primary source of water for that river system. Our own region is in a near-historic drought that has reduced even the little local water the region usually relies on, and increasing population in the southwest is adding demand for water at the same time supplies are rapidly diminishing.

As a water quality focused organization, San Diego Coastkeeper has been drawn in to the debate over water supply because the way the water gets to our tap or sprinkler or ocean has a lot to do with how clean our rivers, bays, and beaches are. That's why we've developed our own water supply hierarchy -- what sources to look to and in what order.

First is conservation, the cheapest and most environmentally friendly way to increase water supply. While this may seem like a truism, and strides have been made over the past 15 years, more must be done to make conservation a regional priority. Whether that looks like mandatory restrictions, a water rate structure that prioritizes conservation for all customer classes, or enforceable water supply assessments for new development, we must do more with what we have.

Next in line is water recycling and water reuse, both potable and non-potable. We've been intimately involved in the City of San Diego's Water Reuse Study and are helping the City implement a plan to maximize the beneficial use of recycled water at the lowest per-unit cost. More about the Water Reuse Study's new water reuse pilot project in a later post.

Last on the list is desalination, done in an environmentally responsible manner. Contrary to some media portrayals, Coastkeeper isn't anti-desalination or anti-progress. However, current open-ocean intake desalination is extremely energy-intensive, which means trading water security for energy insecurity. Exacerbating global warming will simply accelerate drought, so we've consistently advocated for a holistic process to evaluate desalination's place in our water portfolio.

-- GABE SOLMER