

Our View: Let's get the water deal done

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Population growth and new development may increase California's water needs 40 percent in the next 25 years. Yet, there are those who prefer neither to increase.

The long-standing, intractable deadlock in the state's largely self-imposed water crisis could be close to resolution on how to get sufficient water flowing to farmers, homeowners or developers who rely on it, while mollifying those more focused on ecological concerns.

"Enough water falls from the sky and drains into the ocean that if we managed it in an efficient manner . . . environmentalists, builders, farmers — everybody who wants water — could have an ample amount for their preferred purposes," state Sen. Dave Cogdill, R-Fresno, has pointed out.

When disparate interests all insist on getting everything they want, gridlock results. That's why we are encouraged as compromise seems to be in the works. This hope comes after disappointment of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger backing off his threat to veto hundreds of bills unless the Legislature balanced water needs and environmental concerns. Coercion failed, but give and take may yet win the day.

It's unclear whether the compromise being considered is the long-sought fix for a dispute nearly as old as the state and as contentious as any California political issue. Major bones of contention remain on competing water rights protections and construction of infrastructure to be financed through bonds needing voter approval. How to repair and protect the delicate San Francisco-San Joaquin Delta also is being negotiated.

Further delay means badly needed water will continue to flow into the ocean at San Francisco Bay instead of into reservoirs, underground aquifers, dams, homes and to crops. Further delays also mean more ecological damage to levees protecting from saltwater intrusion that degrade water quality in the Delta.

The ultimate solution isn't rationing lawn watering or banning development, although many demand just that. Ideally, we prefer a more market-driven solution to the problem, which has been made more complex by decades of government tinkering on top of layers of conflicting water rights and water demands. Distribution is fairer and more equitable when prices are determined by unfettered supply and demand, rather than effectively subsidized for some and inflated for others because of political considerations.

The Legislature worsened the problem in 2001 with a slow-growth measure mandating new developments have agreements in place to provide them water. Similarly, a federal court ruling reduced the already drought-reduced flow to Southern California with Delta pumping restrictions to protect endangered fish sucked into pumps moving water uphill to canals for the journey south.

It's unlikely all obstacles will be overcome by a Legislature and governor incapable of resolving far less contentious and less complex conflicts. But pending legislation provides a framework for compromise. We urge negotiators to remove remaining barriers so water can be captured, then conserved and distributed, while protecting the ecologically sensitive Delta. None of the competing interests can get everything it wants. But it's possible each can get much and for the state overall to benefit. The Legislature and governor might even rehabilitate their reputations in the process.