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Dust in the Wind



Lately it seems that drought has become a summertime inevitability, like mosquitoes or sunburn, but unlike those relatively minor inconveniences, even one season of drought can have serious, lasting consequences for years—and the drought that has afflicted California for several years is shaping up to be a game-changer for the state's agricultural practices and water regulations.

A report released in mid-July by the University of California–Davis, found that the current drought—the third most severe on record, which this year alone has cost the state \$2.2 billion and 17,100 seasonal and part-time agricultural jobs—is responsible for the greatest water loss ever seen in California agriculture, and is likely to continue in 2015.

The water has to come from somewhere, though, so groundwater pumping likely will replace most river water losses, with some areas doubling their pumping rate from the previous year. The only reason California has had any kind of agricultural success in the past few years, in fact, is because it was able to use groundwater reserves—but in the only state in the nation that lacks a framework for groundwater management, the reserves will deplete further if the drought continues, and costs and losses will increase.

News stories from NPR and MSNBC have described the well-drilling frenzy in the farm-rich Central Valley as the agricultural industry searches for water. State water managers estimate that the drilling has caused water tables in some parts of the valley to drop 100 ft below historical lows, which could cause the land to sink

and even affect the San Andreas fault.

It might not be too late to amend the situation, though. A bill making its way through the state legislature could, for the first time ever, require local agencies to track, and in some cases even restrict, groundwater pumping. And on a smaller, average-citizen scale, the same day the UC Davis report was released, the State Water Resources Control Board adopted drought regulations that give local agencies the authority to fine those who waste water on practices like lawn watering, up to \$500 a day. Some cities, like Los Angeles, already have mandatory restrictions in place, but until the regulation took effect Aug. 1, other places—including cities that never installed water meters—were relying on voluntary conservation efforts and falling far short.

In this issue's news section, *SWS* reports on an analysis released by the Pacific Institute and the Natural Resources Defense Council that posited California could be saving up to 14 million acre-ft of untapped water through a combination of agricultural and urban water reuse efficiencies, including drip irrigation and precise irrigation scheduling; improved storm water capture; and greater water reuse.

Practices like these and additional regulations can help ensure a future agricultural economy and sufficient water for California and the rest of the nation. If we don't act now to preserve water—to use the analogy of UC Davis report lead author Richard Howitt—we will overdraw our reserve accounts and pay a serious price for it. **SWS**

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