

# CALIFORNIA DROUGHT: why should you care?



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**A** recent *National Geographic* article said: "If droughts were hurricanes, people might pay more attention to them. Droughts can creep up on us with their prolonged absence of rain, and their effects often are seen as not much more than cracked ground in dry lake bottoms. Devastating storms can be sudden and meteorologically exciting, and they make great television. Droughts are deliberate—a relatively slow evolution in which it can be difficult to capture the devastation in any one moment."

As the latest National Weather Service data show that more than 80% of California is now in an extreme drought—up from 68% three months ago—I wish the effects of this devastating drought made for great television as well.

It is easy to think of the drought crisis in California as a regional issue. Thanks to an emerging El Niño event, a mild summer has settled across much of the northern and eastern U.S. With plenty of rainfall in these cooler areas, it is hard to imagine that other parts of the country are struggling with drought. But drought is a national concern.

California's gross domestic product is about \$2 trillion, making it the world's ninth largest economy. If the drought

grip continues for another year, some experts estimate several billion dollars of losses for the state's economy, which sustains valuable \$45-billion agriculture and more than \$12-billion livestock, dairy and poultry sectors that are heavily reliant on water.

The extent of the drought's impact on these sectors and corresponding food prices has yet to be seen. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, fruit prices may rise as much as 6%, vegetables may go up as much as 3%, and domestic food prices for meat and produce may go up by 3% to 6% nationwide this year.

Unfortunately, consumer prices are not the only side effect. Water scarcity has led to a drilling frenzy among farmers looking to gain access to groundwater. The overdraft of groundwater is cause for more complex concerns. California's aquifers supply approximately 40% of the state's water in normal years, but in drought years, it could reach 65%, making it the state's biggest water reserve—even bigger than the Sierra snowpack. Because California is the only western state that does not monitor or regulate how much groundwater farmers and residents are using, scientists are warning against pumping too much groundwater.

According to a recent Chicago Public Media report, state water managers estimate that water tables in some parts of the San Joaquin Valley have dropped 100 ft below historical lows. "As water levels sink, the land can sink, too—in some places by about a foot per year."

This issue has attracted a lot of attention and has pushed California to rethink its approach to groundwater. Gov. Jerry Brown now is leading the efforts to protect groundwater supplies. Brown's drought legislation, for example, includes \$1.8 million to hire 10 new state regulators who will focus on addressing "unsustainable groundwater pumping." Additionally, lawmakers have introduced groundwater bills, and the governor's Office of Planning and Research is exploring how the state can combat declining water levels.

Reflecting on the *National Geographic* article ... Drought may not make for great TV; it may not be given memorable names like Superstorm Sandy or Hurricane Katrina, but drought is a persistent threat to our nation's water and food security, and is most certainly a national issue.



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*Water & Wastes Digest* is published exclusively for the 80,000+ decision makers in the municipal and industrial water, wastewater and water pollution industries. These individuals actively design, specify, buy, operate and maintain the equipment, chemicals and services used for water treatment. Editorial content in this audited publication highlights new products and technologies concerning the supply, collection, treatment and distribution of drinking water; the collection, treatment and disposal of wastewater; and hazardous waste pollution control. A product directory is included in the annual June Buyer's Guide.

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