



## Commentary: January storms underline the need for new storage

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The Sacramento Weir releases water from the Sacramento River system into the Yolo Bypass west of Sacramento. Lack of storage capacity required water managers to release water into the ocean that could have been captured if the state had more reservoirs to hold it.

Photo/Ching Lee

Driving to work each morning this past week across the Yolo Causeway, which has been intentionally flooded to take excess flows from the Sacramento River system, I have been reminded of how quickly water can appear in California—and how quickly it can disappear.

After six years of drought, our state's hydrology has turned on a dime—as we knew it could—and the various structures of the California flood control system are shunting something like 150,000 cubic feet per second of

water out to sea as I write this. Some of that water is heading to the ocean because there's just no other place to put it, and flood-control protocols require water managers to make room in reservoirs for expected, later flows.

That brings to mind a couple of things we have been saying for a while here at the Farm Bureau about the capture of our water resources.

By the time you read this, the water in the bypass will probably be down again, and certainly we can't know when the rains will return again—except that they will. And we are told that California's already-inconsistent precipitation patterns will become even "flashier" in the coming decades, which is to say that the experts at places such as the Department of Water Resources predict a long-term trend toward more prolonged drought periods and more severe—if sporadic—flood events.

For the future of our farms, cities and environment, California is going to have to get a lot more sophisticated and strategic about grabbing and holding the water when it comes.

That challenge—a call for a new way of thinking—is really underscored by a new landscape of regulation for water resources in California. Ag Alert<sup>®</sup> has kept its readers well-informed about the various elements of that regulation, including the landmark Sustainable Groundwater Management Act of 2014, which, although locally implemented, will pose a collective, statewide rollback on the use of groundwater. On the surface-water side, readers already know that system-level "flow criteria" are in the process of being adopted for major river systems in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta watershed, which would require levels of unimpaired flow in those rivers as high as 50 percent—a huge threat to water rights and the human use of water.

Farm Bureau has said consistently that the solutions to California's ongoing water crisis fall into the "all of the above" category, which means not just new storage and conservation and efficiency and desalination and recycling, but also "non-flow" measures for the protection of fisheries and wildlife—including habitat/food restoration and control of exotic predators. In fact, one of the things you will be hearing us talk about more in the context of the debate about "flow criteria" on major river systems is whether we instead ought to be talking about "functional flows," which is to say timing the movement and use of water for fisheries purposes in a manner that does not conflict with the human use of water. That's what I meant by "sophisticated and strategic," above.

The same thought about "functional flows," it seems to me, also applies to how we might look at opportunities to use surplus water that crosses our landscape on the way to the ocean, before it disappears. It's abundantly clear to me that at least during brief periods of time here in California—such as we've seen since the beginning of January—we are far more occupied with getting rid of water than we should be, if we had a better ability to hold onto it for use in those later periods in which we find ourselves worrying about drought. It's true: High water is high opportunity in a semi-arid state, if we can only see it that way.

The voters certainly saw it that way with the passage of the Proposition 1 water bond in 2014. We hope the process established by the bond and currently underway in front of the California Water Commission will put the funds promised in that initiative to work quickly in building new storage facilities to capture more water during periods such as this. We were heartened to see Congress pass the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act last month, which could speed that effort on the federal end.

During our punishing multi-year drought, as Farm Bureau and others have renewed the call for additional storage, some advocates have scoffed at the idea, saying, "Even if you could build new reservoirs, you could never fill them." It seems to me that surging Northern California rivers and streams show that's not so. There will be times when California will find itself awash in water—and we must have the reservoirs in place to take advantage of those opportunities.

Whether you're talking about new surface facilities or increased efforts at groundwater recharge and underground storage, it's all smart thinking if you can set aside a piece of those high flows before our floodways send them to the ocean.

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