

Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
The Status of Drought Conditions Throughout the Western United States
Tuesday, May 25, 2021

(Mr. Esquivel:)

- Thank you Mr. Chairman.
- I'd like to first thank the Committee for giving me the opportunity to be here today to testify on California's experiences facing drought conditions and the actions we have taken to adapt to previous and current drought.
- California, and the entire West, is seeing rapidly developing extreme hydrological conditions.
- Extraordinarily warm temperatures in April and early May have separated this critically dry year from all others on California record.
- As we know, between 2012 to 2016, California experienced a record series of dry years, including what were the driest and hottest three-year period from 2013 to 2015 in an estimated 1,500 years based on paleoclimate records.
- The 2021 water year is now likely the 3rd driest year in a 100-year record; with the 2020-2021 water year being the second driest two-year period on record. This means that we are now the driest since the once historic drought of 1977.
- This spring, the Sacramento, Feather and American River watersheds, which feed the major reservoirs of the state and federal water projects, experienced an accelerated rate of snow melt.
- Additionally, much of the snowpack, sitting on very dry ground due to a second consecutive dry year, seeped into the earth, rather than flowing into our rivers and streams and reservoirs.
- These and other factors collectively reduced expected water supplies for our two major projects by more than 685,000 acre feet, which is enough to supply more than one million households with water for a year.
- California's previous experiences with drought conditions means we know the importance of acting early, and that is why Governor Newsom issued a drought proclamation in April in the Russian River Watershed and directed state agencies to take immediate action to bolster drought

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resilience and prepare for impacts on communities, businesses, and ecosystems.

- In May, as dry conditions further developed, Governor Newsom expanded this drought emergency proclamation to include the Klamath River, Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and Tulare Lake Watersheds.
- These actions were taken to help California build resiliency in our communities, to protect the public health and safety, the environment, and our state's diverse economies including that of our agriculture and its workers.
- California is better off today due to the lessons learned from the last drought which include: improved conservation measures to reduce demand, early cross coordination between agencies, development of water use efficiency standards, continued progress on the implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, a risk assessment and analysis of consolidation for small water systems, and the passage of the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Act to help deliver safe and affordable drinking water to some of our most vulnerable communities.
- It has been because of these lessons-learned that we are taking steps such as:
 - Identifying water suppliers at extreme financial risk early that may need additional support due to the combined impacts of COVID and drought;
 - Updating the Department of Water Resources' Dry Well website, which tracks voluntarily reported supply issues by counties;
 - Streamlining our water transfer processes;
 - Issuing early warning letters to water right holders, urging them to plan for potential shortages by reducing water use and adopting practical conservation measures; and,
 - Completing the state's first drinking water needs assessment in which we at the State Water Board identified small water systems and domestic wells that are failing or at-risk of failing to meet the state's drinking water standards.
- Better, informed decisions balance all critical needs of water within the State and particularly in our fragile Delta.

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- Due to our quickly developing hydrological circumstances, planned reservoir releases in April from Shasta, Oroville, and Folsom were not adequate to maintain Delta water quality standards.
- The State Water Project and the Central Valley Project collectively deliver drinking water to more than 27 million Californians and more than 3 million acres of irrigated agricultural land. These projects are vital to the economic security of California and its people.
- It is these projects which are now confronting hydrologic deficits, temperature concerns due to low storage at all three major Central Valley Project and State Water Project reservoirs, municipal user concerns, and critically low carryover storage into 2022 are leading collective action amongst state and federal agencies to modify and adapt to changing conditions.
- Part of these modifications now include pursuing the relaxation of water quality standards the projects would otherwise meet, known as a Temporary Urgency Change Petition (TUCP) and the expedited construction of salinity intrusion barriers in the Delta to help the State maintain upstream storage levels.
- Unfortunately we have also reached the point where the state now needs to curtail some water users, starting with the most junior users and based on California's water rights priority system—because there is simply not enough water available and not enough for senior users to adequately maintain state water quality absent these cutbacks.
- The Governor's emergency proclamation provides my agency, the State Water Resources Control Board, with authority to implement curtailments on an emergency basis. But just as it has become clear that drought is an increasingly persistent feature of California hydrology, so has the need to more nimbly manage of our water system during these times of shortage.
- The state will need to invest heavily in enhanced data and data systems, and standardize curtailment and water availability methodologies if we are to efficiently and equitably manage our precious water resources over the long term.
- The Water Board and our colleagues at the Department of Water Resources and the Department of Fish and Wildlife continue to look at

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ways to conserve storage at our major reservoirs so we can provide cold water when needed, curtail water rights to match water availability, maintain water quality in the Delta for in-Delta uses, and facilitating transfers – all while working to plan ahead for conditions next year.

- This drought framework and integrated regulatory actions will help us also lessen the drought impacts to our state, build resiliency in our communities and protect the public health and safety, and the environment.
- California continues to be faced with the imperative of responding to our unfolding climate emergency. Droughts, floods, wildfires, and extreme weather continue to demonstrate that our 20th century infrastructure is colliding with the realities of our 21st century climate crisis.
- As we read nationally about water, energy, transportation, and other fundamental infrastructure failing due to our climate extremes, the generational opportunity to rebuild those systems to work with and for a 21st century is evident.
- It is why Governor Gavin Newsom has proposed in his May budget revise a \$5.1 billion drought package that includes \$1.3 billion in American Rescue Plan Act funds for drinking water and wastewater infrastructure.
- This down payment on California's water infrastructure is in addition to a \$1 Billion water debt relief program to help households and communities pull out from an economic downturn and ease the burden of a water-shutoff moratorium enacted to protect public health during the pandemic.
- The Governor's drought and water infrastructure package builds on his 2020 Water Resilience Portfolio, which took our collective lessons learned in previous droughts and floods to provide a comprehensive roadmap for California's 21st Century water systems.
- The Governor's actions will now provide us critical funding that includes investments towards:
 - Drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, with a focus on small and disadvantaged communities;
 - Groundwater cleanup and water recycling projects.
 - Improvements to water supply security, water quality and water reliability;

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- Improvements to water conveyance and repair to major water delivery systems damaged by subsidence;
 - The collection of critical data to repair and augment the state's water data infrastructure to improve forecasting, monitoring, and assessment of hydrologic conditions; and
 - Emergency and permanent solutions to drinking water drought emergencies.
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- All of these investments will help us build drought resiliency, but as we know from our recent Drinking Water Needs Assessment there is still much work to be done in meeting the Human Right to Water, and California stands ready to partner with our federal government – in California we know we are all in this together as we take this generational opportunity to invest in our communities and recommit to a just, equitable and climate resilient 21st Century America.
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- Thank you.