

Regional Water Authority
Building Alliances in Northern California



April 7, 2016

Felicia Marcus, Chair
State Water Resources Control Board
1001 I Street
Sacramento, CA 95814



Spencer Short, Chair
Jim Peifer, Vice Chair

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El Dorado County Water Agency
Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency
Sacramento Municipal Utility District
Sacramento Regional County Sanitation District

Transmitted via email to the Clerk of the Board at commentletters@waterboards.ca.gov.

Dear Chair Marcus and Board Members D'Adamo, Doduc, Moore and Spivey-Weber:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on potential adjustments to the February 2016 Emergency Regulation and possible State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) action in response to recent increases in precipitation and corresponding water supply improvements. We recognize both the challenge and the need of the State Water Board to consider water supply conditions throughout the state while assessing this historic drought. However, it is the responsibility of the Regional Water Authority and local water suppliers on behalf of our region's water customers to inform the State Water Board on the Sacramento region's current water supply conditions, which are as follows:

- Folsom Reservoir, one of the key sources of supply for the region, is well above average storage for April 1st, far exceeding storage levels seen in 2013, 2014, and 2015. In fact, releases as high as 20,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) have been necessary to ensure the reservoir can serve its flood protection purpose. Folsom Reservoir, as an element of the Central Valley Project, must be operated in conjunction with Shasta and Oroville Reservoirs. These two reservoirs have similar above average storage.
- The Sierra snowpack, which will fill and replenish Folsom Reservoir over the spring and summer, was at 87% of average on April 1, 2016. Similarly, the 8-Station Precipitation Index was at 123% of average on April 5, 2016.
- The region has a variety of surface water rights and entitlements. As one notable measure of the adequacy of these supplies, the Bureau of Reclamation announced a full contract allocation for the municipal and industrial users in the American River Division.
- While much of the region relies on surface water from Folsom Reservoir and the American and Sacramento Rivers, the region is also served by groundwater supplies from a sustainably managed basin with a robust conjunctive use program. Prior to the drought, the region saw rising groundwater levels in the spring of 2010 and 2011. During the drought, groundwater level declines have been relatively minor since 2012, totaling only about 5 to 10 feet in the basins underlying Sacramento County. Significant recharge has already occurred this year, and the modest decline in groundwater levels has ceased, and is recovering.

The Sacramento region was one of the first areas of the state to be faced with the impacts of the drought, and took early action to respond to the local water supply conditions. On January 9, 2014, the Regional Water Authority Board adopted a resolution to reduce water use 20% throughout the region. This was followed shortly by the Governor's first Emergency Declaration. Local water users, recognizing the severity of the drought, achieved a 19% decrease in water use in 2014, and a 30% decrease in water use in 2015. While we were the first into the drought emergency, the nature of our supplies, infrastructure, and hydrologic conditions dictates that we might also be among the first to recover. Current hydrologic conditions make it imperative that the State Water Board recognize that the Sacramento region can no longer be considered to be facing a drought emergency.

Failure to take action, as early as practicable, will strain the credibility of both the State Water Board and local water suppliers. Failure to act may be counterproductive to long term water efficiency improvements.

To respond specifically to the questions posed in the Notice of Public Workshop, see comments below.

1) What elements of the existing February 2016 Emergency Regulation, if any, should be modified and how so?

The mandatory nature of the water conservation requirements should be rescinded in areas of the state that are experiencing relatively normal or better hydrologic conditions. The focus in these areas of the state should return to long term improvements in water use efficiency. The State Water Board has an opportunity to reinforce the conservation ethic displayed by residential water users during 2014 and 2015 with the right message now. "Conservation as a way of life," as called for in the California Water Action Plan, can only be achieved through appropriate long-term actions.

2) How should the State Water Board account for regional differences in precipitation and lingering drought impacts, and what would be the methods of doing so?

The State Water Board should use available hydrologic data for each region to evaluate whether the drought still represents an "emergency" in a given region. This could be accomplished on a hydrologic region level as defined by the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). DWR publishes monthly water supply condition data in Bulletin 120 that is organized by hydrologic region and includes precipitation, snow water content, reservoir storage and current and forecasted runoff. The State Water Board can use this information to assess each hydrologic region and decide which regions are recovering and which regions are still experiencing severe drought conditions. The variability in conditions in 2016 is significant, with the North Coast, Bay Area, and Sacramento River hydrologic regions experiencing near normal or better hydrologic and water supply conditions, while much of the rest of the state is still dry.

3) To what extent should the State Water Board consider the reliability of urban water supplier supply portfolios in this emergency regulation?

Ideally, the reliability of a water supplier's portfolio should be the fundamental element in considering mandatory water conservation during drought. Unfortunately, it has been only minimally considered during the current drought emergency. While we would always prefer a specific assessment of a water supplier's conditions, considering the temporary and limited nature of the Emergency Regulation and the need for immediate action, submittal and evaluation of 411 different supply portfolios for reliability may not be a workable strategy to meet the State Water Board's desire to address changing water supply conditions.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments. Please let us know if we can provide any additional information that can help the State Water Board concur with our conclusion that an ongoing statewide drought in California does not represent an emergency for the Sacramento region. We look forward to continuing this important and timely discussion.

Sincerely,



John Woodling
Executive Director
Regional Water Authority