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Study: Finger-pointing won't solve water woes

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Tuesday, December 8, 2009



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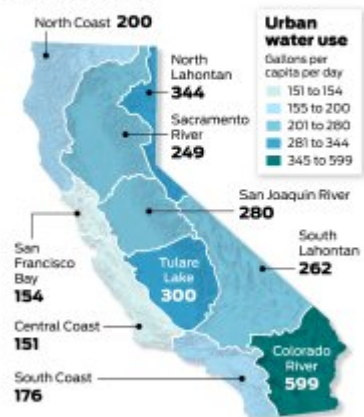
Pick your culprit - endangered fish, wasteful farmers, Southern Californian swimming pools.

Depending on where you sit, each is singled out as one of the main causes of the Golden State's water problems.

IMAGES

California water use by region

A new report by the Public Policy Institute of California takes aim at common myths about the state's water system. Among them is the assumption that urban dwellers in Southern California waste large amounts of water. The report says that in key urban centers in the South Coast, water use per capita is far lower than in other parts of California.



Notes: Figures show 2005 applied water use. The high usage in the Colorado River region is partly due to the number of golf courses there. Sources: Department of Water Resources, Public Policy Institute of California, Todd Trumbull / The Chronicle

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But a new study by a nonpartisan think tank says California's water crisis is far more complex and the blame - as well as the solutions - must be shared by all.

"The finger-pointing approach is extremely unhelpful because it suggests there are good guys and bad guys," said Ellen Hanak, senior fellow and water policy expert at the Public Policy Institute of California. "For sure, there are better ways to manage the system, but ascribing good to bad actions isn't the way to do it."

The institute's report, released Monday and titled "California Water Myths," focuses on eight widely held assumptions about a state water system straining under pressures from an expanding population, drought, deteriorating ecosystems and failing infrastructure. Relying too heavily on those assumptions, the report's authors assert, makes for

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animated sound bites but gets in the way of real progress in improving California's long-term water supply, quality and reliability.

Among the myths and the report's rebuttals:

-- California is running out of water.

While the state does have a limited supply of water, Hanak and the report's other authors contend that the state is running out of inexpensive, abundant water.

-- California can build or conserve its way out of its water problems.

While new water storage and conservation are significant, Hanak says neither is a cure-all.

-- Consensus on solutions is achievable and will keep all parties happy.

Hanak argues that the solutions to the water crisis require tough trade-offs and strong leadership from lawmakers.

Of all the assumptions in the report, Hanak said, myth No. 2 is among the most pernicious and widespread.

That one states, "(Insert villain here) is responsible for California's water problems."

For instance, among Northern Californians, Southern California's golf courses and swimming pools are to blame.

Among environmentalists and urban dwellers, the villain is wasteful water practices by federally subsidized agriculture. At least one study appeared to lend credence to that claim: Oakland's Pacific Institute found earlier this year that California farmers could save enough water each year to fill Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy reservoir 16 times by using more efficient irrigation techniques.

Some of the harshest accusations about the state's water crisis, however, come from the farmers themselves. To many of them, the villain is endangered fish, such as the delta smelt, whose steep decline foreshadowed the fading health of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the maze of canals, levees and wetlands that constitute the heart of the state's water network.

Just last week, after the state Department of Water Resources announced the smallest initial allocation estimate for water deliveries in its history, Central Valley lawmakers renewed their calls for waiving the federal Endangered Species Act, which they say is



responsible for putting thousands out of work and fallowing huge swaths of fertile farmland.

The House of Representatives' action on a "Turn on the Pumps" bill will show "who ... favors fish over families," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Alpaugh (Tulare County), an outspoken critic of the Endangered Species Act.

But Hanak and her team of researchers say each group must shoulder a certain amount of the responsibility for problems that arise from "having a vibrant economy and society in an arid climate."

"Both urban and agricultural water users throughout the state have considerable opportunities to use and manage water more efficiently," the report said.

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This article appeared on page C - 3 of the San Francisco Chronicle



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