

Drought Myth Busters

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California's drought has spawned numerous misperceptions about the state's water system and water use. Here's a look at some of the myths and the facts that debunk them.

Myth: Agriculture is not being asked to do anything to conserve water this year.

Fact: Agriculture has taken the brunt of this drought with severe cuts in surface water deliveries for the last two years. More than 500,000 acres are being taken out of production this year and growers are directing whatever water is available to permanent crops such as trees and vines. Last year, economic losses totaled more than \$2 billion and some 17,000 jobs lost in the agricultural sector alone. This year, many farmers are set to receive zero surface water deliveries. By contrast, cities are being asked to cut water use by 25% overall in California.

Myth: Agriculture uses 80% of California's water.

Fact: According to the California Department of Water Resources, farmers use about 40% of the state's developed water supplies. About 10% of the state's water goes to urban uses and the remaining 50% flows to environmental uses such as wetlands, refuges, lakes and rivers.

Myth: Desalination is the answer to California's water shortage.

Fact: Desalination alone cannot meet all of California's water needs, but it can play an important role in some regions. Though recent advances in technology have made ocean desalination an increasingly viable option in some coastal areas, it remains relatively expensive and the construction and permitting of the desalination plants is a lengthy process. Desalination is part of the larger water supply portfolio for California.

Myth: Forecasters say an El Niño year is likely coming in the fall. This will end the drought.

Fact: Forecasters predicted a strong El Niño year in 2014 that never materialized. Even if the heavy rains do arrive, state water managers say it will take 200 days of above-average precipitation to make up for the dry years that have depleted our state's reservoirs.

Myth: Turning off the water while we brush our teeth and taking shorter showers are the most important things we can do to help conserve water.

Fact: Reducing indoor water use through shorter showers and other means will certainly help, but the biggest savings can come from reducing outdoor water use. Depending on where you live in California, 50% or more of your total household water use is used for outdoor landscaping, particularly ornamental turf. For that reason, cutting back on outdoor watering of lawns and other ornamental landscapes is the fastest and most effective way to reduce water use.

Myth: Fracking is using a large portion of our water.

Fact: Fracking uses 274 acre-feet of water a year, according to the California Department of Conservation.

Myth: Bottled water companies such as Nestle are taking a large share of the state's water by bottling it and selling it elsewhere.

Fact: Nestle uses 1000th of 1 percent of the state's water.

Myth: California has only one year of water left.

Fact: The state's reservoirs reached historic lows earlier this year, raising concerns about future supplies if the drought continues. But conservation, water recycling, water transfers, and groundwater supplies can stretch existing supplies for several years to come.

Myth: California's huge store of groundwater will always carry the state through its dry spells.

Fact: Groundwater has a critical role to play in drought years. Growers and water managers throughout the state have relied heavily on groundwater basins since the drought began. In some parts of the state – particularly in the Central Valley – some wells have gone dry. To protect this resource longer term, California last year passed the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, which seeks to improve local management of groundwater resources. Water managers also continue to pursue a comprehensive plan – including additional water storage capacity, recycling and water use efficiency – to improve the reliability of surface water supplies to replenish groundwater basins.

Myth: There's plenty of water in the system, but regulations protecting fish – particularly in the Delta – are making this drought so difficult for humans. The needs of fish are placed above the needs of humans.

Fact: The situation in the Delta is highly complex and there are many factors that must be considered when making water management decisions. There are many regulations that benefit both humans and fish and address concerns related to managing drinking water supplies, protecting ecosystems, and ensuring water quality and temperature. This year the drought has made management decisions more difficult but officials are taking necessary actions. For example, low flows in the Delta prompted state officials to install a salinity barrier in late May to protect water quality and reduce the amount of fresh water that may need to be released from reservoirs to combat saltwater intrusion.