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An Open Letter on the California Water Fix – Part 6

“Everyone Should be Eating Veggie Burgers”

The LA Times, in an article headlined “Gov. Brown says 'Spaceship Earth' approach will see California through drought” reported on two appearances in Los Angeles last week by Governor Jerry Brown <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-brown-drought-20150609-story.html#page=1>. The full video of his appearance at USC can be found at <http://www.latimes.com/local/drought/la-me-water-in-the-west-live-htmlstory.html>

Readers are urged to view the entire video in order to see the context of his remarks which may be lost in a newspaper report or a blog. And, the Governor made a number of points of broad principle which were quite good, and a couple of asides about politics which were excellent. But when it gets down to the details, the Governor is often loopy, if not plain wrong. Several examples follow. The LA Times reporting is shown, naturally, in Times Roman, the direct quotes from the Governor are in italics, and my comments are in Georgia, my Australian accent being vaguely Southern.

“The metaphor is spaceship Earth,” Brown said. *“In a spaceship you reuse everything. Well, we’re in space and we have to find a way to reuse, and with enough science and enough funding we’ll get it done.”* True the Earth is a relatively small planet in a tiny solar system, but it is infinitely larger and more complex than a spaceship. And, while the total amount of water on the planet is more or less fixed, we still have some flexibility in how we managed it. In California we just need to get smarter about how we manage it. See Part 1 of my continuing open letter on the California Water Fix. Certainly conservation, recycling, rainwater and stormwater capture, and brackish and ocean water desalinization will help stretch our water supply, but the basic distribution system could better serve fish, farmers and urban and commercial users if it were sensibly re-configured.

“Some people call water a right. Some people call water the essence of life,” Brown said. *“Water is more than H₂O. Water’s a baptism, water’s a poetry, water has an iconic role in human history and human existence, so how we play with water, it’s not like a widget.”* The Governor said this in response to a question about the disparity between \$20 an acre-foot water in the Imperial Valley and \$2,400 an acre-foot water from the new ocean water desalinization plant in Carlsbad, and further said *“the beauty of economics is that it is abstract.”* At a minimum some of my economist friends might disagree with that. The

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Governor was on safer ground when he said that the existing water rights system is a function of California's history and that it is politically difficult or impossible to change it overnight.

However, Brown returned to a more grounded view of the world when he made an impassioned plea for his \$25-billion Bay Delta Conservation Plan (now renamed the California Water Fix), much as he did when he visited the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California earlier in the day. The plan involves the construction of two tunnels to convey water to Southern California, as well as the reconstruction of the levees in the delta where the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers meet. I am not sure where that language comes from since as far as I know the California Water Fix does not provide for any levee improvements, but if the Delta levees were further improved as recommended in the Economic Sustainability Plan of the Delta Protection Commission at a cost of \$2-4 billion, the tunnels would not be necessary and there would be benefits to multiple parties, not just the water exporters.

The proposal, Brown said, was the result of more than 1 million hours of work, and *“the best that human beings, employing the best science possible, can come up with.”* See Part 3 of my continuing open letter for the response to this – “The truth is that The Fix’s predecessor, the BDCP, was panned by every scientific panel that ever reviewed it and the Federal EPA. That is what has forced the reboot. A million man hours is worthless unless it is competently and honestly directed.”

The plan has been heavily criticized by environmental groups, but Brown said that failing to reconstruct aging levees would assure a future water crisis if they were breached. (So why not do that at a much lower cost than building the tunnels?) *“What’s there is a very vulnerable system based on hundred-year-old levees made out of dirt that can collapse, or can suffer onslaught of a torrent of salt water from the bay,”* Brown told the MWD board of directors. *“If those break through, because of a storm, extreme water events, rising sea level or earthquake, then that delta conveyance will be full of salt water and not fresh water and that is something affects Los Angeles, it affects farmers ... it affects all of Southern California ... and it affects Silicon Valley.”* See Parts 4 and 5 of my continuing open letter and the report by KCRA3 that is linked in Part 4. The chance that the Delta levee system will be damaged by some mysterious earthquake, the length of any subsequent interruption of exports, and the economic cost of such an interruption, have been greatly exaggerated. Unlike the premature reports of Mark Twain death, which were easy to refute because he was still alive, once these fairy tales are put out to the public, while it is easy to refute them on technical grounds, it is not so easy to counter the incorrect impression that has been made. We might reasonably expect a little more leadership and emphasis on the facts from the Governor of the State.

And, from a separate report in the LA Times on the Governor's appearance at the Metropolitan Water District <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-brown-drought-mwd-20150609-story.html#page=1> these two further whoppers:

“If we do nothing ... there will be a collapse, whether it be tomorrow, five years, 10 years, 20 years. It's going to happen in the lifetime of the people in this room,” Brown said. See my response above. This is pure hyperbole.

Brown said the plan would actually help store surplus water that California would get in wet years, which could then be transported down to Southern California and fill in empty reservoirs. Without the system, California would have to flush out excess freshwater to the Pacific Ocean during wet years. The first part of this is simply wrong and the second part is muddled. The “plan” or The Fix, as it is now called, does nothing to help store surplus water in wet years. Under the existing system water exports actually drop during the second and subsequent wet years in a stretch of wet years, such as we typically have every 15 years or so, because there is nowhere to put the water. The dams are full and the fields are waterlogged. This will not change under The Fix. See Part 1 of my continuing open letter for how we could actually do this. The flushing out of the Bay Delta estuary in wet years is really important to maintaining some semblance of the native ecosystem. At points in the Governor's rambling responses in his USC appearance, he seemed to show a good appreciation for the human and natural history of California and their values, but when it comes to the scientific and engineering details, he himself appears to have been flushed out to sea.

I might have more comments after the inestimable Maven transcribes the Governor's remarks in full, but there are additional beauties like *“water is a property right”* for the right wingers, and *“if you ask me, everyone should be eating veggie burgers”*, for the social engineers.

Check out <http://FixCAWater.com> for the earlier open letters in this series.

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