

Wishful Thinking

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One year ago, I was optimistic that California, the West, and our country were on the verge of a “tipping point”, where our policy makers would collectively “get it”, and begin to work earnestly towards finding financial and regulatory means to re-start what has effectively been stalled for over three decades: the development of new, modern water infrastructure. Several issues contributing to my thinking at that time:

- Protests and wide-spread media attention in the San Joaquin Valley were beginning to build momentum in support of Governor Schwarzenegger’s push to get state lawmakers to approve new money for dams and canals. These actions ultimately contributed to a groundswell of public support that led to the momentous reform of California's water system signed into law six months later, including the decision by state lawmakers to place an \$11 billion water bond on the November 2010 ballot, designed to fund the law's provisions.
- In Washington, D.C., the new economic stimulus package had been announced, and it included hundreds of millions of dollars for water infrastructure - just for the Bureau of Reclamation. The largest stimulus project funded by the U.S. Interior Department was the Red Bluff Diversion Dam Fish Passage Improvement Project, in Northern California.
- A 2009 United Nations study highlighted the grim reality that global food production must be increased by 70% in the next four decades to meet escalating world hunger demands. I was hopeful at the time that policy makers would also recognize that family farmers and ranchers in the American West for generations have grown food and fiber for the world, but that their future ability to do so hinges on certain irrigation water supplies.

Last year, I truly (and apparently, naively) believed that all of these developments would lead to a perfect storm (or maybe even, a perfect gentle rain shower), where economically lean times would force policy makers to realize that, sometimes, you just have to go back to focusing on the essentials – food, water, infrastructure – prioritize those issues, and begin strengthening communities and economies through that focus.

Well – I guess it was just a case of wishful thinking, on my part.

One year later, the move to modernize California’s water infrastructure has taken two steps backward, and the crippling red-tape thrown up by government agencies in dealing with natural resources issues is worse than ever.

With the economy circling the drain, it appears that many politicians in Sacramento once again will punt on investing in long-term water fixes. The \$11.1 billion water bond is in trouble, and Governor Schwarzenegger – who has been championing this issue for more than two years straight - now thinks it should be pulled from the ballot and reconsidered in the 2012 election.

The prospect of waiting another two years for an opportunity to invest in California's water infrastructure is disappointing. While this appears to be a temporary delay, water users throughout the state must not forget that the reasons still exist for passing a bond and they're not going away. Water conservation, recycling and desalination efforts and water transfers are important tools for improved management of increasing scarce water resources. However, these demand-management actions must be balanced with infrastructure enhancement measures that provide the proper mix of solutions for California. All of these tools would be supported by the bond measure.

At the national level, all one has to do is watch the news and witness the frustration of local and state officials grapple with the effects of the Gulf oil spill to realize that the federal government is definitely not in a “streamlined” mode of regulation and action. Reuters on June 19 reported that angry state and local officials blame dozens of federal agencies involved in approving response plans, a maze of regulations and poor coordination for their struggles beating back the slick.

"There is no streamlined system here," the governor of Louisiana exclaimed.

Sounds familiar. Modern, integrated water storage can provide tremendous physical and economic flexibility to address growing water demands. However, this flexibility is limited by legal, regulatory, or other institutional processes, which can take longer to address than actually constructing the infrastructure. For example, construction of High Savery Dam in Wyoming ten years ago was completed in two years. The uncertain and constantly shifting permitting process that preceded construction took 7 times as long.

So, reality sinks in, and the fight must go on. We must continue to urge the federal government to adopt a policy of supporting new projects to enhance water supplies while encouraging state and local interests to take the lead in the planning and implementation of those projects. And we must counter viewpoints from some in Sacramento that fail to fully recognize what the water bond would have accomplished and the consequences of not approving it now. All of California has benefited from those of the past who looked into the future and saw how a reliable source of water would improve the lifestyles of all through a growing economy.

That growth is now jeopardized because of an aging infrastructure and intractable bureaucracy.