



Op-Ed Article
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Can we weather the drought in the High Desert?

By Beverly Lowry, Mojave Water Agency Board President

Recent California news has been dominated by the drought, and rightly so. We are experiencing the third straight year of drought conditions, and snow levels in Northern California are at a record low. Here in the High Desert, many are asking the question, "Is it time to panic?" The answer is no, but it is also not the time to rest. While our region has made great strides in water conservation, we need to continue to increase conservation efforts, and investments in infrastructure and programs to ensure water for today and tomorrow.

As the Board President of the Mojave Water Agency, I am pleased with the progress we've made. Some of our neighbors in other regions around the state are concerned with having enough water for the next several months. Here in the desert we have enough supply to sustain us without any imported water for the next three years, and possibly more depending on rainfall and other factors. How did we accomplish this? The simple answer is by planning and working together.

Born and raised in Kansas, my parents instilled in me old-fashioned values such as preparation. I grew up on the adage, "save for a rainy day," and it has proven to be good advice. Upon moving to Barstow some 50 years ago, it became clear to me that folks living in the desert truly needed to save water and establish a non-rainy day fund of surplus water. That's why long ago I became involved in water issues with the Mojave Water Agency, and it's been a pleasure to watch our region come together and embrace long-range planning to protect us from drought, and support investment in key infrastructure, and aggressive conservation programs.

As a result of this collaboration, the current drought didn't take our region by surprise. The Mojave Water Agency, working with our cities, the county, water districts, water companies, and our community, has been strategically planning for drought conditions. Every drop counts when you live in a region that receives less than six inches of rainfall

a year. That's why collaborative planning is so important. It helps us to focus regionally, using our collective resources to accomplish more. It also helps us identify our strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. One of our greatest opportunities is in our own backyard. It's the desert's own unique geology.

Our natural groundwater supply is fed by water runoff from the local mountains. This underground reservoir provides supply and offers critical storage capacity. It's a water bank that allows the region to save water during wet years, and reduce our reliance on imported water supplies during times of drought or when the State Water Project allocations are restricted for other reasons.

A project designed to store water is called the Regional Recharge and Recovery Project, known as R³. This project strategically replenishes local aquifers along the Mojave River and banks surplus State Water Project water for eventual use in drier years. Recently completed, R³ uses a series of groundwater wells, pipelines, booster pump stations, and recharge basins to deliver drinking water to local participating cities. Groundwater recharge and storage programs like R³ have resulted in the banking of an additional 130,000 acre-feet of imported State Water Project water beyond what is needed to keep the groundwater basin balanced. One acre-foot can supply two families of four people for an entire year.

Water banking is just one way to safeguarding our water supply, but it is only one tool. Conservation is equally important, and we have made great progress.

One of our most successful water conservation programs is the Cash for Grass program that has helped promote a culture of conservation. Since 2008, the Cash for Grass program has resulted in the removal of more than 6.1 million square feet of turf. Ten years ago, per capita water use was 250 gallons a day versus 160 gallons per person today. We're required by state law to reduce our water consumption by 20 percent by the year 2020. We've already surpassed that goal and have reduced water usage by 30 percent through turf removal, water wise landscaping, low-flow toilets, and efficient drip irrigation systems.

Our efforts are working, but we know we cannot rest on our accomplishments. We must continue to save water. On the government side, we need to find more ways to leverage our resources, and continue planning and investing in strategic projects like R³ and urge greater conservation to protect and enhance our water resources. Individually, each of us must do our part whether it's removing turf, repairing leaky pipes, or installing water-wise toilets or showerheads. Let's continue to work together to ensure water for today and tomorrow. For more ways to save water, visit www.mojavewater.org or call the MWA office at 760-946-7000.