



Working Together on Water December 7, 2020

By Cannon Michael and Ann Hayden

Despite a seemingly endless era of upheaval – a surging pandemic, contentious election cycle and racial strife – we still have the responsibility to address pressing issues that cannot wait for calmer times. The future of California’s water is one of those issues.

While collaboration and relationship building have been made even more challenging due to distancing required by COVID-19, we believe that water is an issue where we can rise above party lines and entrenched perspectives.

Water is the backbone of California’s agricultural economy, supports our iconic rivers, and of course, is essential to our survival. Simply put, water is a lifeline that binds us together, and without it, we jeopardize our future and that of coming generations.

Could now be the time to collectively start down a better path for managing this precious resource and roll up our sleeves to make it happen? We think so.



For decades, fighting over water has stalled progress and sown deep mistrust across different water users.

We have forgotten that we are all stewards of California – a special place like no other, a rich connected tapestry of environmental beauty, diverse communities and productive agriculture. We need to come together as Californians – not just farmers, environmentalists, rural community organizers and urbanites. We need to come together as Californians working for our children and future generations who are depending on us to leave them with a better California than we have today.

We need to come together to solve some admittedly difficult water challenges that affect the future of rural communities, cities, wildlife, farming in the Central Valley and consequently our country’s food supply. Drought and water scarcity are high on the list of these challenges. During our last major drought, the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act was enacted as one major piece of the solution to ensure we have enough water for future generations.

Looking forward, 2021 will be an important year for moving ahead on implementation of this sweeping change to water law. The state will be rolling out its first assessments of sustainability plans developed by regions with the most critically overdrafted groundwater supplies.

Balancing groundwater supply and demand, as required by the law, will no doubt be challenging: Some models say San Joaquin Valley landowners may need to take equivalent acreage to Yosemite National Park out of production to balance groundwater supply and demand.

To reach durable, fair solutions to such large challenges, we need to drop the baggage we've amassed over time. We need to come together as Californians to start collaboratively tackling problems – not just talking and arguing them. We need to come together and break the cycle of mistrust and take the time to truly understand how each side views the challenges and potential solutions.

It's unlikely we will agree on everything – if we did California wouldn't be the dynamic, diverse state it is today. But there is significant common ground we can build from. For instance, we all agree every single person in California should have clean and affordable drinking water when they turn on their kitchen faucet.

We also agree that replenishing groundwater is one of many solutions we will need to comply with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. But it's not the only solution; it's inevitable that we still will need to scale back some agriculture.

The question we need to address is, how can we make sure that agriculture can still thrive while some farmland becomes productive in new ways, whether it's with less water-intensive ranching, low-impact solar projects, wildlife habitat or recreational areas for our families to enjoy on picnics and hikes?

Taking action to address these challenges may mean parts of our state and the very communities we live in will look different from how they look today. But if we can come together as Californians to get it right, California will evolve and endure as the special place it is today for generations to come.

We have decades of experience coming at water challenges from our silos. Let's break down those silos, come together as Californians and see what happens. Isn't it worth a shot?

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