



Watering plan for the future

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Thursday we discussed the vicissitudes of wind and solar power generation. Today, we turn to water.

Nothing provokes a debate about water supply more completely than a drought, which California is now in, and has been for the better part of four years. There could be winter rains that will help, but there will have to be a biblical deluge to compensate for the moisture California has not received since 2010.

Gov. Jerry brown is stumping in his campaign for re-election, and among his major themes is an emphasis on securing and ensuring a future water supply for this state's 35 million residents. Proposition 1 on the Nov. 4 ballot asks voters to approve more than \$7 billion in bonding capacity to strengthen California's water portfolio.

Desperate measures are being taken by local water districts and other municipal governing bodies. The Solvang City Council recently authorized the hiring of a water cop, someone who would make the rounds, checking to see who may be wasting water. If scofflaws are found, the city also can levy stiff fines.

The water-cop authorization comes even after Solvang water officials report local customers have reduced their usage by more than 20 percent.

The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors has asked its Water Agency to study local water supplies — even as water officials admitted it's too late to do much with regard to mitigating impacts of the current drought. The study would be aimed at dealing with major issues in future drought situations.

Instead, the board-authorized study will examine the county's water supply through 2040, with emphasis on pinpointing potential supply options, and what those options will cost.

County officials could find some clues — at least about costs — in a recent discussion among members of the Santa Barbara City Council, relative to reactivating that city's long-moribund desalination machinery.

That plant was completed in 1992, in response to a citywide vote, which was a response to a seven-year drought that brought the South Coast to within a few weeks of its main water source, Cachuma Lake, going bone dry.

Mother Nature intervened in that drought, sending the March Miracle storms that ended the drought, thus taking drastic drought measures off the table. So, the hyper-expensive desal plant was placed in standby mode in 1994. The plant sat in mothballs, until officials decided to sell off some key parts. The drought was out of sight, and therefore out of mind.

This current drought has put the issue back on the table, and Santa Barbara officials are discussing reactivating the desal plant — at an initial cost of \$32 million-plus, then another \$5 million or so a year to produce potable water from the ocean, at a cost of about \$1,700 an acre-foot.

That would increase a typical Santa Barbara household's water bill about \$20 a month, which is still cheaper than some North County cities' water rates.

That \$1,700 an acre-foot for desalted sea water seems like a lot — until you compare it to the cost of having no water at all. If you think the battle over fossil-fuel production in Santa Barbara County is intense, just see what happens if this drought drags on, as experts say seems likely.

County officials are seeking the public's input. In other words, they need fresh ideas on how to resolve the issue of finding enough water to keep us going. You can add your thoughts by going to: countyofsb.org/watersupplyreport

Now is the time to make your voice heard.