



CAPITOL WEEKLY

THE NEWSPAPER OF CALIFORNIA GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

DWR warns of drought, water rationing in 2009

By [Sarah Kay Hannon](#) (published Thursday, November 20, 2008)

California faces another drought as 2009 approaches, and the state's top water officials say they're doing what they can to prevent water shortages. But projections show that 2009 could look like the early, parched 1990s — or even worse.

Nine counties have already requested emergency drought assistance, including Sacramento, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern.

Wendy Martin, statewide drought coordinator for the state Department of Water Resources (DWR), said the state has informed contractors they will only receive 15 percent of their normal allocation.

As of Sept. 1, the drought has cost farmers of the Central Valley \$260 million, a figure that doesn't factor in the amount for crops that won't be harvested this fall. Many farmers are being forced to make difficult choices, including abandoning harvesting some crops this year altogether.

Many nut crops, especially almonds and walnuts, are being abandoned. These crops are being hit worse than crops toward the north of the state because they are down-stream from the Delta.

"The North is okay," Martin said. "The South is more dependent on imported water... It has a cascading effect."

Some farmers are also selling off livestock they can no longer afford to take care of. The Department of Food and Agriculture says the number of California cattle dropped by 6 percent from January 2007 to January 2008. More declines are expected in January 2009.

While farmers are getting used to the idea that they will not be able to have all the water usage that they prefer, many consumers are still blind to the problem.

University of California economist David Zetland compared the situation to the rise and fall of gas prices, and said that price of water should be raised.

"When gas prices hit \$4 a gallon, people were more careful with their usage," Zetland said. "Let's avoid rationing."

Zetland said the next step after raising prices of water usage would be increasing a block-rate by around 40 percent in utilities.

How water is managed is also becoming a local issue. For instance, the largest water district in the East Bay has taken local control over how consumers manage their water usage. As of September and October, customers billing rates have been raised by 10 percent. Surcharges of 15 percent have been added to bills belonging to customers' who have no intention to cut back on water usage. Global warming might be partially to blame for the dry conditions.

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A study released last week by a pair of researchers at the University of California Berkeley Department of Agricultural and Resources Economics predicted that climate change could end up costing California \$300 million to \$3.9 billion a year. The Sierra snowpack, an important and free source of water storage in the state, could decline by 30 percent to 80 percent by late century. The loss of water resources could end up costing the state \$5 billion, according to researchers Fredrich Kahrl and David Roland-Holst.

But California droughts are not anything new.

"We are experiencing more dramatic storms instead of consistent rain," said Martin. "But no, I do not think that global warming itself is the cause."

Zetland and others have argued that farmers are contributing to the drought by the unregulated use of well water. Farmers are allowed to take as much ground water as they want.

"There is no monitoring of ground water," Zetland said "More monitoring is what we need."

Zetland went on to say that water managers are "creating" the next shortage.

"What are water managers doing? They're telling people that they'd better use less -- or face rationing," he said. "So, business as usual. Too bad, because that won't work... It is the engineers and the DWR that screwed up."

"I wish we were that clever," Martin said.

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