

Opening Remarks by Ranking Member Tom McClintock
House Natural Resources Committee
Water, Oceans and Wildlife Sub-committee
April 2, 2019

The sub-committee meets today to consider “The State of Western Water Infrastructure and Innovation.” Central to this discussion is a simple question: which is better: abundance or shortage?

The answer is so self-evident, it seems like a trick question.

According to the California Energy Commission for San Diego County, the mean cost of water differs greatly, depending on the source. The most expensive way to produce water is desalination at the cost of \$2,300 per acre foot. Water recycling costs \$1,500. Importing water costs \$925. Groundwater storage costs \$737. The cheapest source of water is good, old-fashioned surface storage – dams and reservoirs – at \$600 per acre foot. Surface water storage gives us nearly four times as much water for the dollar as desalination.

Everyone agrees we need to produce more water infrastructure. The question is, for the same price, would it be better to get one gallon or four gallons?

This sounds self-evident to most people, but we continue to see a drive to discourage dam construction – even tear down existing dams – while pouring billions of dollars into desalination and recycling that promises only scarce and expensive water for our future.

Instead of storing California’s abundant rain-fall before it reaches the ocean, they prefer to spend four times the cost of storage to reclaim the water AFTER it has been needlessly lost to the sea.

The last generation understood this, and it built the dams and aqueducts that we still rely upon today. They did so through the beneficiary pays principle: the state and federal governments advanced money for construction that was then repaid by the users of the water and power produced by the projects.

In the 1970’s, we abandoned these projects – sometimes in mid-construction. The good news for California is that we still have an abundance of water.

The Colorado River system has an annual flow of about 14 million acre-feet, while the Sacramento River averages about 25 million acre-feet. Yet we store 60 million acre-feet on the Colorado (four years of flow) and only 11 million acre-feet on the Sacramento, (less than six months of flow), losing most of the rest to the Pacific Ocean.¹

We keep hearing that climate change means less water. That's not what we're observing. According to the EPA, annual rainfall in the contiguous 48 states has increased 17/100ths of an inch each decade since 1901. That's two inches more annual precipitation over the last 12 decades.

California receives an average of 200 million acre-feet of water through precipitation each year. That is 4,500 gallons of fresh water every day for every man, woman and child in the state. And yet under legislation soon to take effect, Californians will be limited to 55 gallons of water for residential use.

There is no shortage of water storage projects that could be financed by the beneficiary pays principle. One example is Shasta.

The Shasta Dam was designed to be built to 800 feet but currently stands at only 600 feet. The extra 200 feet would produce nine million acre-feet of additional storage – nearly doubling the water we could store on the Sacramento system. But a project to raise the dam just 18 feet – that would store an additional 630,000 acre-feet – has been stalled for decades by endless environmental reviews.

So I now pose the question again in a more practical sense. We could spend \$1.4 billion to raise Shasta dam by 18-feet or spend \$1 billion for another Carlsbad desalination plant. Shasta would yield 630,000 acre-feet each year; Carlsbad 56,000 acre-feet. And consider this: when water is drawn out of Shasta, it generates electricity; enough for about 710,000 homes. When water is drawn out of Carlsbad, it consumes ¼ megawatt for every acre-foot of water. In other words, Carlsbad consumes enough electricity to power 250 homes in order to produce enough water for one home.

Desalination and recycling make sense where there is no other source of water. Perhaps future technological breakthroughs will make them practical even where there is an abundance— I certainly would like to think the entire ocean is available to meet our needs -- and we should continue research. But at this stage of

¹ Trinity: 2.4maf; Shasta: 4.5maf; Oroville: 3.5maf; Folsom: 0.98maf.

technology, and in a water-rich region like California, this policy borders on lunacy.

Droughts are nature's fault; water shortages are our fault. That's the choice we made 40 years ago when we discouraged construction of new dams. And we now have to ask ourselves whether we really want to live in an era of self-imposed water and power scarcity or restore abundance as the object of our water and power policy.