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In the drying West, dams are no longer the answer

George Miller

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In the 1960s, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation began planning a reservoir on the American River, hoping it would become a major element of California's extensive system of dams and canals that ships water across the state. The bureau studied the proposal, to be called Auburn Dam, for decades only to find the dam would cost \$10 billion to construct - if it ever survived environmental review and if earthquakes didn't render the site useless in the interim. This fall, the State of California finally revoked the federal government's unused water right for the project. Ultimately, the Bureau of Reclamation spent more than 40 years and \$300 million studying a dam that would never be built and would never deliver a drop of water.

The Auburn Dam boondoggle is not an outlier. The Bureau of Reclamation is a billion-dollar-a-year water management agency created for a different era, when our nation had different needs. Enormous water infrastructure projects like dams and reservoirs once drove agricultural and urban development, but no longer. Today, the serious water challenges facing the American West have been exacerbated by climate change, and the largest water manager in the country hasn't adapted. The Bureau of Reclamation has constantly convinced themselves that building one more big dam - or one more canal - would finally solve our water problems.

In some cases, reservoirs help to meet our new water needs, but such expensive and time-consuming projects only make sense in the context of an agency that follows the science and the law, is a wise steward of the resource, and promotes cost-effective solutions. It's hard to say that the Bureau of Reclamation is that agency, and to remain relevant in the coming years the agency will have to reinvent itself.

President-elect Barack Obama has articulated a clear and compelling vision of a government that, in sharp contrast to the last eight years, addresses real-world problems. As he said last month, "This isn't about big government or small government. It's about building a smarter government that focuses on what works."

Smart government, when it comes to supplying water to cities, farms and the environment in the 21st century, will mean leaving behind the dam-building and pipeline-laying federal bureaucracy of the last hundred years. If we put our money into proven and cost-effective strategies like groundwater cleanup and better coordination between reservoirs, then we can dramatically improve the reliability of our existing clean water supplies without wasting time and energy chasing the cumbersome and expensive infrastructure dreams of the past century.

Instead of spending time and money we can't afford to study dams that will never be built, the federal government should work with local water managers who have cost-effective plans to stretch their existing water supplies. In the city of Pittsburg, in my congressional district, and in other parts of the

Bay Area, for example, water managers are actively pursuing alternative water supplies through water recycling, where wastewater is treated and the clean result is reused for commercial irrigation and industrial processes. This allows us to add water to the system - quickly, reliably and without causing environmental damage or depending on increasingly unreliable snowpack. Congress authorized the San Francisco Bay Area Regional Water Recycling Program last year, which will pump nearly \$30 million in federal seed money into the system that will be matched many times over by local entities. Congress will be pursuing similar efforts in the years to come.

Under the Bush administration, the Bureau of Reclamation fought these proposals every step of the way.

Federal agencies also need to do much more to help businesses, farms and cities adjust to a new, more water-constrained future by becoming more efficient. California has already proved it can rise to such a challenge with energy use: We use 40 percent less electricity per capita than the national average, and a recent UC Berkeley study found that our investments in energy efficiency have created more than a million jobs while saving Californians \$56 billion in energy costs. We can take that model and apply it to our world of water.

Significantly improving the water-use efficiency of major appliances and fixtures could save billions of gallons of water per day, yet today there are no tax incentives targeted specifically at water conservation. Expanded federal incentives, improved research and development, and stronger federal efficiency requirements can help us reduce our reliance on dwindling or unstable water supplies, while driving innovation, saving money and adding to the economy.

Now is the time to have a serious conversation about whether we will still need a \$1 billion-a-year federal dam construction and water management agency in the 21st century. The president-elect and his team clearly understand the challenges posed by a warming and more variable climate, and they recognize that a smarter government can help America meet its challenges. It's time to insist that an old bureaucracy learn new tricks so that we can meet our clean water needs without breaking the bank or wreaking havoc on our natural waterways.

Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, is a member of the House Democratic Leadership and the former chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee.

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