

Editorial: Water conservation should be first on California legislative agenda

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The governor and lawmakers are in a special legislative session, attempting to craft a solution to California's water woes. But their focus on multibillion-dollar bond proposals that would pay for dams, reservoirs, canals and other expensive water works shouldn't be getting the most attention.

Instead, policy-makers should be requiring more conservation and efficient water use. Reducing wasteful water use offers the most cost-effective way of ensuring California's fragile water supply.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and lawmakers need to make sure that water agencies, consumers, businesses and farmers have the proper system of mandates, incentives and pricing in place so that California can continue making strides in efficient water use.

Efficiency gains already have been significant. California's total water use is down sharply from a peak in 1980 even as the state's economy and population have grown sharply. The state's per capita consumption of water has stayed at roughly 1,100 gallons a day over the past decade, down about 40 percent from 1970, estimates the Pacific Research Institute.

But more needs to be done.

The greatest potential for additional efficiencies is among California's urban residents. More homeowners need to install low-flow shower heads and toilets, efficient washing machines, and drought-tolerant landscaping. Businesses like biotech companies or car washes need to speed up adoption of newer water-efficient practices and recycling. And policy-makers need to put in place appropriate pricing and incentives that promote conservation.

Agriculture, which uses 80 percent of the state's water, also needs to accelerate changes. Farmers should speed up the installation of drip systems, sprinklers, sensors and other technologies. Today, only about 35 percent of the state's farm land uses drip irrigation. But with about 50 percent of the land still on wasteful flood irrigation systems, there's a lot more room for improvement. Farmers, whose water often comes at cheap, subsidized prices, also need to continue shifting away from water-intensive crops such as cotton and alfalfa and toward more water-efficient, higher-value fruits and vegetables.

Improving the management of groundwater and increased use of recycled water also should be encouraged.

Conservation and more efficient water use may not solve the problem. But Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, are working primarily on bond proposals for 2008 - \$9 billion and \$5.4 billion respectively - that call for building more storage and delivery systems.

That might be needed, but policy-makers should first look to using some of the \$10 billion in water-related bonds voters already passed last year.

Both the governor and lawmakers should resist the urge to simply throw a lot of concrete at the water problem, with taxpayers picking up the tab. Building infrastructure will always look like a bolder solution compared with conservation and efficiency. But sensible, achievable and less expensive strategies should not be shortchanged.