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Californians should favor dam expansion plan: Tom Campbell



Shasta Dam is one of California's largest generators of hydroelectric power. Photo: Bureau of Reclamation

By Tom Campbell | Orange County Register

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The Public Policy Institute of California, one of the most respected, neutral research institutes in our state, reports that more than a third of all the water that falls on California in the form of rain or snow flows to the Pacific Ocean.

This constitutes a greater percentage of our water than agriculture, industrial and urban uses combined. The next largest destination for California's water is environmental, which also exceeds all that is consumed by agriculture, industrial and urban use combined. Together, water going to environmental uses and water flowing to the ocean make up two-thirds of all California's water.

Last year, California ended its drought. Meteorologists predict this rainy season will also be plentiful. In our state, however, drought is always just a few years away. In 1952, California's greatest chronicler, John Steinbeck, commented that, "During the dry years, the people forgot about the rich years, and when the wet years returned, they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way."

Sixty-seven years later, perhaps California can finally become far-sighted. During an extra rainy year, California could put some of the water that would otherwise flow to the ocean in storage against the next drought.

The effects of the last drought are still obvious in California's agricultural belt.

Making a map of the 20 counties of California whose unemployment exceeds the statewide average is to draw the outline of our state's agricultural region. In an unbroken thread north of Sacramento almost to the Oregon line, Sutter, Glenn and Tehama counties all exceed the state's unemployment average. Going south from Sacramento to Los Angeles, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Fresno, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties form a continuous strip of above-average unemployment. All are agricultural counties.

The drought forced farmers to fallow fields of row crops and to uproot almond and fruit trees. Farmers are hesitant to replant, uncertain about the restoration of water supplies. Those who suffer most live at the edges of the economy of agriculture: those who plant the crops, harvest them, sell the feed, fuel and farm supplies to furnish the most productive farm land in the world, if there is water.

From this perspective, the federal government's plan to increase the storage capacity of Lake Shasta, created by the Shasta Dam on the Sacramento River, is both sensible and compassionate.

The project is feasible because the dam was constructed in 1945 in such a way as to allow for raising its height, in response to the need for water that was foreseen to grow, a project tremendously easier than building a new dam in a different location. Heightening the Shasta Dam would not impede any of California's free-flowing streams, as new storage projects might. The higher dam will increase Lake Shasta's available water by 14%.

The New York Times nevertheless criticized this project: "For years, the Interior Department resisted proposals to raise the height of its towering Shasta Dam in Northern California. The department's own scientists and researchers concluded that doing so would endanger rare plants and animals in the area, as well as the bald eagle, and devastate the West Coast's salmon industry downstream."

In the past, the federal government had allowed California fields to crack and go parched, on behalf of "rare plants and animals in the area," which inhabit some land that would now be underwater behind the dam.

How much land? The answer is less than 5% of the land originally affected by the dam. Downstream salmon can be completely protected by filling the extra capacity of Lake Shasta only during times of water surplus, thus causing no diminution in normal downstream flow.

How the bald eagle fits in is harder to understand, except as an obscure appeal to patriotism. The Department of Interior under its new secretary has reversed that policy, and the dam construction is beginning. The New York Times is dismayed; Californians should rejoice.

Tom Campbell is a professor of economics and law at Chapman University. He was California's finance director, a state senator and a five-term congressman. He is one of the founders of the Common Sense Party, a new political party in California.

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