



Urban Water Management Plans: California Needs to Connect Urban Development With Real Water

California requires all water districts that provide water to urban customers to prepare Urban Water Management Plans and update them on a regular basis (Water Code Sections 10610-10656). The plans must provide information about how much water each water agency or purveyor manages in a normal year, a “wet” year, and “dry” and “very dry” years. The plans must also forecast future water demand within their district boundaries and detail how water supplies will be provided over the next twenty years to serve future growth.

Working in tandem with the Urban Water Management Plans, two major pieces of legislation were adopted in 2003. The “Show Me the Water” bills (SB 610 and SB 221) were intended to coordinate local water supplies and land use decisions by requiring water agencies to prepare water assessments and written verification of water supplies for residential developments of 500 units or more.

These laws were a good start towards preventing near disasters like the one that occurred last year involving Mountain House, a planned community of 11,000 homes near Tracy in San Joaquin County. The unincorporated community came close to running out of water when its sole supplier’s Delta water rights were terminated due to California’s historic drought. This and many other examples up and down the state illuminate the need to tighten our water planning statutes and requirements when new growth is proposed.

Water agency assessments and verifications of water supplies are based on their Urban Water Management Plans but there’s no requirement that these plans reflect current reality.

- California requires water agencies to update Urban Water Management Plans every five years to ensure the agencies have long-term reliable supplies to meet the demands of current and future customers.
- Both SB 610 and SB 221 identify Urban Water Management Plans as the planning document that should be used to meet the requirements of these statutes. Urban Water Management Plans are intended to work in concert with cities’ and counties’ General Plans in planning new development projects.
- Though California requires water agencies to produce Urban Water Management Plans, no attempt is made to verify the accuracy of the supply or demand projections in these plans.
- Los Angeles’ 2010 plan overestimated average annual deliveries from the State Water Project to Southern California’s water wholesaler, the Metropolitan Water District, for the most recent ten years by a factor of two, and overestimated the minimum amount of water it would receive in a critically dry year by a factor of three. Documents with estimation errors of this magnitude should not be used to plan the use of resources critical to our future.

The State Water Project, a major supplier of water to communities in Southern California and the Bay Area, continues to provide unrealistic assumptions about the amount of water it can deliver.

- The State Water Project is a major supplier of water to Silicon Valley and Southern California.
- Every two years, the State Water Project produces a Delivery Capability Report to aid its customers in developing their Urban Water Management Plans.
- The 2015 version of the Delivery Capability Report does not take the realities of the current drought into account. The State Water Project continues to promise more water than it has been able to deliver over the past ten years.
- The latest Delivery Capability Report makes no provision for the impacts of climate change that could dramatically change future water supplies, such as a dwindling Sierra snowpack. The report continues to base its water delivery model on historical data that ends in 2003.

Urban Water Management Plans and the State Water Project Delivery Capability Report must reflect the reality of California's most recent drought, and must not ignore the impacts of climate change.

- The 2015 Urban Water Management Plans are not required to consider climate change, and the State Water Project Delivery Capability Report makes no attempt to include climate change in its delivery projections.
- The most important water supply documents underpinning growth and development must reflect climate change in their projections.

The "Show Me the Water" bills need to be tightened so that all significant new development (not just subdivisions over 500 units) also requires a water assessment and written verification of water supply.

- Because California faces an uncertain water future, any significant new development should be subject to the provisions of SB 610 and SB 221 so that the cumulative effects of all new development are taken into account when planning local and regional water supplies.

The original Urban Water Management Plan legislation needs to be amended to include a verification procedure for water supply and demand estimates.

- Urban Water Management Plans need to be based on actual, not paper water. The State needs to include an independent verification of water supplies in its Urban Water Management Plan process for at least the largest water districts.

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