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Drought's Over but Water Issues Remain

By Kevin Tilden and Noah Mundt

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Rains returned to California, and with them major snows to the high peaks of the Sierra and across the West. In response to the deluge, which has replenished many California reservoirs, Gov. Jerry Brown this month announced an end to drought restrictions throughout most of the state.

This is good news, but the debate should go on around wise and balanced use of our water resources. Providing sound direction, the governor wisely reminded us all in his executive order that “this drought emergency is over, but the next drought could be around the corner. Conservation must remain a way of life.”

His point about conservation is particularly meaningful for conditions on the Colorado River system. Parts of Southern California import more than 50 percent of their water from the Lower Colorado, recently declared the most endangered river in the United States.

Sixteen years of drought combined with overallocation of the river's water means that since 2003 demand for water from the Colorado has consistently exceeded available supply. For the river, the drought might never really end because the amount of water to which cities, tribes, farmers, and others have legal rights is larger than the amount that flows into the system.

Our dependence on the fragile river system is extensive. It supplies drinking water to 38 million Americans, irrigates 5 million acres of productive farm and ranch lands, and provides hydroelectric power to the Southwest. A 2015 study by Arizona State University found that in seven Southern California counties, the river's water supports more than 7 million jobs and \$650 billion in gross state product annually.

It's clear much is at stake, and as business leaders we know we must double down to ensure reliable, sustainable water and power supplies for agriculture, industry, and communities. In addition, we need to invest in and promote the river itself, a magnificent thread of life running through vital and iconic landscapes, and others like it.

We don't have to choose one over the other, but we do need to make smart choices and develop innovative solutions. That's what business does best. We want to work with policymakers and water managers in California and beyond to mitigate business risk, secure our water future, and advance productive initiatives that include investment in and support for:

Water Conservation

Conservation works. The region has seen meaningful reductions in water as a result of conservation efforts, and especially during the recent drought. At the federal level, we must continue to support programs in the Agriculture and Interior departments that invest in efficient water infrastructure for cities and farms.

Water Data, Innovation, and Technology

Business and communities will benefit if innovation is unleashed in the water sector the way it has been in the energy sector. Clean tech companies in California have led on energy efficiency, battery storage, and the Internet of Things. Companies such as Siemens are harnessing technologies to create “intelligent” water networks and deliver real-time usage data to water managers and consumers. Partnering government investment with private-sector innovation will continue to reduce water use and create American jobs.

Industrial Reuse and Recycling

Only 7 percent of water is reused in the United States. Companies such as GE Water, AT&T, California American Water, and Nestle are pushing those numbers up by investing in water reuse and recycling in their operations. Significant opportunities exist to expand social, economic, and environmental benefits from water reuse through tax credits, low-interest loans, and financing of reuse and recycling technologies and systems.

Flexible Water Management

Business needs flexibility to adjust to changing conditions in water supplies and meet new demands. Farmers, ranchers, industry – and our rivers – will benefit from sound programs and policies that facilitate flexible management solutions, including water transfers, banking, and trading.

Collaborative Water Planning

Western governors, federal and state officials, and water managers are mitigating the impacts of overallocation and drought through restructuring water delivery schedules for Colorado River water and conservation. However, even with the recent weather, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation says there is still a 33 percent chance that Lake Mead will drop below the “declared shortage” level in the next three to four years. Continued federal support, funding, and leadership are critical at this time.

Smart water practices and policies will build a secure water future for business, the communities in which we live, and the rivers and streams that make the West the place we call home.

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