

SAN GABRIEL VALLEY TRIBUNE

STATE RESTRICTIONS

It's a water shortage, not a drought

By Tom Coleman

It's true that water levels in aquifers at some farms across the state have dropped because of excessive groundwater pumping, and regulations limit the transport of more Northern California water southward. But those issues, along with more demand from an increasing population than can be met in a normal year, don't constitute a drought. They add up to a water shortage.

The evidence of this shortage has become abundantly clear this winter.

Take, for instance, the spectacle of millions of gallons of water rushing over the emergency spillway at a storm-swollen Lake Oroville.

While there is too much water in the state's second-largest reservoir, and parts of California are on track this year for historic rain and snowfall, regulators insist on maintaining emergency drought rules because groundwater levels are depleted in some regions.

Drought is determined by precipitation, and there is no shortage of that this winter. After more than five dry years,

It is imperative that the state use emergency drought regulations only when necessary.

the Sierra Nevada snowpack is nearly double the historic average for this time of year, and more storms are on the way.

Declaration of drought is tricky. There are no universal rules for when one begins or ends. But there are some important criteria.

When state water regulators declare drought, they do not address localized impacts like ranchers engaged in dryland grazing or small water systems lacking a reliable water source.

Recovery depends on reservoir levels and the abundance of spring snowmelt. Historically, California's severe, multi-year droughts have ended when statewide precipitation is about 150 percent of average.

We are there.

According to the latest

weekly report from the U.S. Drought Monitor, areas of exceptional and extreme drought have disappeared from California, down from more than 60 percent a year ago. Severe drought conditions remain in a mere 1 percent of the state, while 8 percent remains in moderate drought.

Things haven't looked this good, hydrologically speaking, since 2013.

Even our reservoirs are replenished in all areas except for Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, and aquifers in the Central Valley could be raised to near pre-drought levels by the end of this rainy season.

So why are we still in emergency drought mode, with the governor and state regulators extending restrictions on water use?

It is imperative that the state use emergency drought regulations only when necessary. Otherwise, when calls for shorter showers and drought-tolerant landscaping accompany the next drought, the public will be less willing to comply.

Under current regulations, which the state recently extended through at least May,

water districts are allowed to set their own efficiency targets for customers, based on whether they have enough supplies to withstand three years of drought. Only a handful of water providers in the state lack those long-term sources and require water-use restrictions.

California's water shortage can also be blamed on environmental regulations that hold back our full allotment from the State Water Project.

This is nothing new for Southern California, where water suppliers are adept at drought planning and storage. We have invested heavily in water efficiency and no longer require the state's oversight.

When the snowpack is at record levels, when flood plains and bypasses are brimming with water, when reservoirs are full and releasing water in anticipation of additional runoff and when surface water is plentiful, then you do not have a drought.

Let's call it what it is: a water shortage.

Tom Coleman is general manager of the Rowland Water District in Rowland Heights.