



THE LAST RIVER

Tapping California's largest source of water

By Barry Nelson
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There is only one river left to slake the thirst of California, as the nation's most populous state keeps growing. The state's other rivers are tapped out. We need this last great river more than ever as global warming threatens to make longer, drier droughts the norm throughout the West. But you won't find California's last river on any map because it's a virtual river. It doesn't exist as a physical river, but that doesn't make it any less real.

One needn't look far to find the virtual river. It's just a Google search away. State water managers have known about it for years. In fact, they put it in California's State Water Plan for anyone to see. And they identified it as the largest source of new water supply in California, the largest source by far. Simply put, the virtual river is a combination of water-use efficiency, water recycling, improved groundwater management and advanced urban runoff management. The virtual river dwarfs all other options.

Why tapping the virtual river is not the top priority of every water leader in California is another story. It's a story that needs to change. The San Francisco Bay-Delta is in trouble, an ecosystem in the midst of collapse. We can't squeeze more water from the Delta without forcing a cascading series of fish extinctions – from salmon to sturgeon to Delta smelt. That's not just bad for fish; it's bad for people. A Delta too sick to support its fisheries can hardly be relied upon for clean water supply. That's why Delta farmers see the Delta smelt as the canary in their coal mine.

The situation on the Colorado River is equally dire. After decades of taking more than its share, California has had to reduce its take from the river as the six other states in the river basin have reasserted their claims. As it is, the river is so overdrafted that it dries up before it reaches the sea. Now the record drought in the Southwest could empty Lake Mead. Many hydrologists predict this massive man-made reservoir will never be full again.

In the last century, pioneering engineers, with names such as Mulholland and O'Shaughnessy, tapped mighty rivers to provide water supplies, without which the Golden State would not be what it is today. The state and federal water projects are engineering marvels. They made California home to the nation's most vital agricultural region and enabled growth of the world's seventh-largest economy.

California's future depends on another feat no less astounding than the dam-building projects of yore. Making the most of the virtual river will require a whole new mindset. It will require recognition that every water drop saved – whether by conservation, recycling or groundwater and storm water management – counts as water supply. Those drops add up to more than 7 million acre-feet of water a year. That is more than has ever been exported from the Delta – the largest single source of water in the state. It is larger than the American, the Merced and the San Joaquin rivers combined. Environmentalists and urban water agencies agree that no other future source comes close to the virtual river.

The virtual river offers many other benefits. It can save energy and reduce global warming pollution because vast amounts of energy are currently needed to pump water from the Delta and the Colorado River. Moreover, the virtual river is less vulnerable to global warming; shrinking snowpacks and extended droughts will not affect its flow. One of its headwaters – advanced urban runoff management – can help clean up Southern California beaches by capturing storm water runoff before it picks up contaminants and pollutes our coastal waters. Finally, the virtual river can help us leave water in our real rivers, helping to save the Bay-Delta and our salmon fishing heritage.

Like the rivers that provide water for California's cities today, the virtual river will not simply flow to our doors. Success will require carefully designed policies and leadership from all levels – from the governor, state and federal agencies, and the Legislature to regional and local water districts, local governments and individuals. Gov. Schwarzenegger's recent call for a reduction of California's per capita water use by 20 percent is an important first step.

We are at a turning point in water policy – and in California history. According to legend, Mark Twain once said that in California, “Whiskey is for drinking. Water is for fighting over.” We have had our share of water wars in California. However, tapping into this virtual river is a task that can unite the state, ensuring our future water supply and finally proving Twain wrong.

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