

# Los Angeles Times

---

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-ed-thirst7apr07,0,4783063.story>

*From the Los Angeles Times*

## **No water, no development**

**The days of supplies for almost every project must end. California must build smart.**

April 7, 2008

During the 20th century in Southern California, city founders made a religion out of building bounteous -- and sometimes boundless -- suburbs in the most unlikely locations. They assumed that the water their new communities needed to thrive would somehow flow to them.

For the most part, if they made their claim early enough, they were right. Because the state and federal governments poured billions of dollars into dam and canal systems that carried water over vast distances, past far-flung burgs, engineers could almost always find a way to get a little more of it to thirsty towns. In tract after tract, water followed development, rather than the other way around.

In the 21st century, this ethos of expansion must come to an end. California's water supply is finite, but its population is growing. Forecasters believe that the state, which has 38 million residents today, will have 48 million by 2030. In many places, formerly dependable groundwater is now polluted or depleted. Prolonged drought on the Colorado River -- combined with increased demand for its water from growing states such as Nevada and Arizona -- almost certainly will reduce water deliveries from the east. Diminished snowpacks in the Sierra and environmental restrictions in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta almost certainly will reduce water deliveries from the north. And it's unclear how climate change will affect California's water supplies.

It's a matter of common sense: It is time for development in California to follow the water. Even as our state continues to grow, sprawl can no longer be our birthright. Hydrologically remote regions cannot depend on new sources of imported water for human needs, much less for verdant lawns.

### **Countering the culture**

No one really knows how much water exists to support development. Yes, the state Department of Water Resources publishes a reliability report, which gives cities an idea of how much water they can expect to receive through the State Water Project in wet, dry and "average" years. And yes, California has laws on the books designed to prevent land-use planners from building where no water is available: 2001's "Show Me the Water" bills, SB 610 and SB 221, which require that governments review supplies and verify their availability

LINK **appear** in writing before approving new developments of 500 or more units. Water districts and land-use planners to take these laws seriously. Last year, the Eastern Municipal Water District, in Perris, cited the laws when it delayed approval on nine commercial construction projects (only one of which has thus far received a green light, and only because the developer was able to save water on another project).

Unfortunately, these laws don't establish a strict, uniform standard for estimating water supplies. Individual water districts generate the estimates. And some of these districts, in preparing reports for land-use planners, may rely too heavily on "paper water," flows that exist in legal allocations but aren't really on hand and may never be. As one former state legislator explains, "If people point to paper water, there's always enough for everybody."

Planning based on paper water might not have been troubling in the past, when there were fewer pressures on California's water system. But today's outlook calls for a more conservative approach to development. Put bluntly, it makes little sense to depend on new water imports -- even if they "exist" as allocations -- when planning thousands of new homes in an isolated region. But depending instead on more secure local water supplies -- responsibly managed groundwater, gains from conservation, wastewater recycling and reuse -- is anomalous to California culture and will be a hard sell.

Critics of building-friendly local governments frequently complain that water and land-use officials are controlled by developers, who have long been enthusiastic contributors to political campaigns. Whether that is true or not, it's almost certainly the case that California water agency culture is loath to say no to developers for a less-pernicious reason: Water districts are in the business of delivering water to local communities -- they don't see their job as determining water use policy -- and they don't like to say no to their customers. The same can-do attitude that led William Mulholland to build the Los Angeles Aqueduct guides his descendants in their determination to find new water, whether or not it exists. Even if a peripheral canal is built in the delta and supplies from the State Water Project become more predictable, there is no guarantee that more Northern California water would come developers' way. Indeed, political realities might call for a grand compromise whereby less of this water -- not more -- flows south. There may be limits, after all, to our expansionist zeal.

There's another cultural tenet to overcome: Californians' devotion to the easy suburban lifestyle (or at least, the easy suburban lifestyle as we know it). Thirty-nine percent of residential water use in California occurs outdoors, mainly when homeowners water their lawns. One way to secure "additional" water for growth is to cut yard sizes and impose landscaping restrictions on new and existing neighborhoods.

Built-out areas have to do their part too. Homeowners must get used to the idea of living near higher-density, water-efficient infill. They also must accept tiered pricing for water, which would discourage outdoor use. In parts of Sacramento, residential water usage isn't yet metered; in many parts of the state, groundwater is not measured or aggressively managed. Obviously, these policies discourage the mindfulness that all Californians must adopt, and they should be corrected.

The good news is that water districts, entrepreneurs and developers are beginning to understand the need for change and are getting creative. Some developers already minimize yard areas and install parallel pipe systems to deliver recycled water for outdoor use. Potentially, developers also could become key partners with public agencies that want to expand the use of recycled water outdoors. Just as they front funds to install the pipes that connect new communities to public water systems, they could become a source of funding

for conservation technologies and recycled water infrastructure in existing and new communities.

Even with water supplies in question, California can build to accommodate its millions of new residents. But it must build smart.

---

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at [latimes.com/archives](http://latimes.com/archives).

**TMSReprints**

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

partners:

