

The California drought: Water-rationing plan leaves corporate interests untouched

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The unprecedented drought gripping California has deepened for the fourth consecutive year, having already set new records for the lowest annual precipitation levels on record. 2014 brought the highest calendar-year temperature for the state, while this February was the hottest on record and this January the driest.

A recent study conducted by Daniel Griffin and Kevin J. Anchukaitis found that the current episode “is the most severe drought in the last 1200 years, with single year (2014) and accumulated moisture deficits worse than any previous continuous span of dry years.”

Last Thursday, California Governor Jerry Brown announced a new bill, which he claims will provide \$1 billion in drought-related spending, mostly on flood protection. The bill merely expedites funds already approved by California voters, and will do nothing to resolve the state’s dire water crisis.

Last Tuesday, the California State Water Resources Control Board intensified emergency legislation targeting residential “water wasters,” initially implemented last summer. The law imposes a \$500 fine for offenses including excessive lawn watering.

Both measures leave untouched the giant agribusinesses and oil corporations that account for a majority of the state’s water usage and dominate the political system.

On Sunday, Chuck Todd, host of NBC’s *Meet the Press*, asked Governor Brown whether “considering how much water...is used for fracking [hydraulic fracturing]...isn’t that alone enough reason to prohibit fracking or temporarily stop it?”

Brown sought to deflect the question, responding: “No, not at all. First of all, fracking in California has been going on for more than 50 years. It uses a fraction of the water of fracking on the East Coast for gas, particularly.”

Throughout his entire political career, dating back to the 1970s, Brown has been entirely beholden to Big Oil, while posturing as a defender of the environment. He has accepted at least \$2 million in campaign contributions from oil corporations since 2006, including Chevron, Occidental Petroleum, Southern California Edison, Valero Energy, Tesoro Corp, Conoco Phillips and Aera Energy (owned jointly by Shell and ExxonMobil). Most of these companies donated the

maximum amount possible to Brown’s reelection campaign last November.

Earlier this year, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that, for years, state regulators knowingly allowed oil companies, mostly in the impoverished Central Valley, to pump their wastewater into groundwater aquifers that contained drinkable water.

Every year, the oil industry in California produces roughly 130 billion gallons of wastewater, as the state is the third-largest oil producer in the US. Kern County, home to most of California’s oil and hydraulic fracturing (fracking) wells, has the worst air quality of any county in the US, along with some of the highest rates of cancer and respiratory illness.

Climate change, a byproduct of the oil corporations’ unrelenting drive to accumulate profit, has played the most significant role in determining the length and severity of the ongoing drought, as well as the likelihood for future droughts.

On March 12, the leading bourgeois press outlet in the state, the *Los Angeles Times*, prominently featured an op-ed penned by NASA’s senior water scientist, Jay Famiglietti, titled “California has about one year of water left. Will you ration now?”

Famiglietti begins the op-ed by stating that “Right now the state has only about one year of water supply left in its reservoirs, and our strategic backup supply, groundwater, is rapidly disappearing.” He proposes a water rationing scheme across “all of the state’s water sectors, from domestic and municipal through agricultural and industrial.”

Despite the calls by experts to place restrictions on business, last Tuesday the State Water Resources Control Board furthered emergency drought regulations that target solely consumers, leaving agribusiness untouched. Local water districts must restrict lawn watering to twice weekly, among other tepid reductions in consumers’ water usage.

The state will now place local water agencies under intense scrutiny, ensuring that they levy \$500 daily fines against “water wasters” that were first enacted last summer. Over the past year, few fines were doled out locally, with one notable exception being Santa Cruz, which issued over \$1.6 million in penalties against individual consumers. The cities of San Ramon and Dublin, both east of Oakland, issued \$40,000 in

combined fines.

Instead of adopting any sort of progressive policy to implement well-known, rational planning methods that would ensure the viability of California's water supply for future generations, the existing political setup seeks to reduce the highly complex issue to merely punishing individual consumers.

The drought has already devastated thousands of working-class families, as an estimated 17,100 agricultural laborers lost their jobs during last year's growing season alone, with that number expected to rise significantly this year. The brunt of these job losses occurred in the agricultural heart of the state, the Central Valley, a stretch of land roughly 450 miles long, from Bakersfield in the south to Redding in the north, and between the Sierra Nevada to the east and the Coast Ranges to the west.

Between the spring of 2013 and the spring of 2014, water levels in groundwater basins throughout the Central Valley fell by 50 feet or more, amid a race to drill ever-deeper and more expensive groundwater pumps. In one of the Central Valley's most productive agricultural regions, Tulare County, 874 well permits were issued in the first six months of 2014 alone, 44 more than the county issued in all of 2013.

In the process, hundreds of private wells across Tulare County dried up, leaving thousands of East Porterville's working-class residents without water. The state's only response to this dire crisis has been to provide limited amounts of bottled water to inhabitants, with no plans implemented to develop water infrastructure for residents.

A package of three bills signed last September by Brown will implement the first-ever groundwater regulations in the state, but will have no effect until 2040, and even then will not require businesses to report how much water they pump individually. Barring an end to the drought, which scientists have noted could become a decades-long "megadrought," all remaining groundwater will have long disappeared by that time.

The legislation passed last Tuesday does nothing to curb groundwater usage by the agricultural giants, the only ones capable of shelling out upwards of \$400,000 to drill the 2,000-foot (600-meter) pumps required to extract dwindling groundwater reserves.

Agriculture accounts for roughly 80 percent of California's total water usage, while the remainder is used by urban industry and household consumers, with outdoor landscaping accounting for roughly half of total urban usage. Thus, at most the recent regulations will cause a 5 percent reduction in the state's total water usage.

California produces over 99 percent of all almonds, pistachios, olives, walnuts, rice, plums, dates, figs, raisins, artichokes, kiwis, peaches and pomegranates grown in the US, and is also the leading producer of dozens of other food commodities. In recent decades, international demand has led to a large transition toward growing orchard and vineyard

crops.

During the drought, many farmers have fallowed even more of their traditional vegetable crops, diverting water toward almond trees and other orchards, which take longer to mature and are thus a larger capital investment. California currently grows roughly 80 percent of the world's almond supply, in addition to 43 percent of all pistachios and 28 percent of all walnuts, and these cash crops are indispensable to maintaining profitability.

The "almond empire" is centered in the San Joaquin Valley, home to the largest almond-growing monopoly in the world, Paramount Farming. Paramount's owners, Stewart and Lynda Resnick, are closely connected to Governor Brown, as well as Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein and other state politicians, and have influenced water policy in the state for decades.

This couple is the modern-day reincarnation of the most corrupt aspects of former Los Angeles Mayor Frederick Eaton and his associate Joseph Lippincott, immortalized in the character of Noah Cross, played by John Huston in the 1974 Roman Polanski classic *Chinatown*. In addition to Paramount Farming, their holding company also owns Paramount Citrus and Paramount Farms, the world's largest growers of citrus and pistachios.

Financial interests, including New York-based retirement and investment fund TIAA-CREF and Hancock Agricultural Investment Group, a subsidiary of the insurance and financial services giant Manulife Financial, have recently joined the bumper crop frenzy, becoming some of the largest nut growers in California.

Despite the proven efficiency of drip irrigation for orchard and vineyard crops, 20.3 percent of all vineyard and 13.4 percent of all almond and pistachio crops in the state continue to be grown using flood irrigation methods. Thus, almond trees alone presently account for 10 percent of California's total annual water usage, more than the combined domestic usage of the state's 38.8 million inhabitants.

There are immense efficiencies to be gained through the statewide adoption of crop-specific irrigation methods and other efficiency improvements. Yet any such rational reorganization is blocked by the interests of the US financial oligarchy, which, controlling the entire political system, will not abide any impingement on its profits.



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