

California governor's emergency drought measures leave agribusiness giants untouched

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On April 1, California Governor Jerry Brown issued an Executive Order mandating that the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) implement water rationing guidelines that must lead to “a statewide 25% reduction in potable urban water usage through February 28th, 2016.” On Saturday, the State Water Board released draft regulations to meet this standard, which will be finalized after its May 5-6 business meeting.

The emergency regulations, taken in response to severe drought conditions, place the burden of water conservation primarily on the shoulders of working class residents, while leaving the vast agribusiness giants and other large corporate interests—which consume the overwhelming majority of the state’s water resources—untouched.

The restrictions come in response to Department of Water Resources (DWR) estimates of record low levels of mountain snow, which supply rivers and streams as it melts. On the Sierra Nevada mountain range, whose snowpack normally provides the largest yearly source of freshwater, there is a mere 1.4 inches of water content, five percent of the historical average of 28.3 inches for April 1 and 80 percent lower than the previous lows for the date in 2014 and 1977.

The State Water Board regulations released on Saturday set conservation benchmarks for the state’s 411 local water districts ranging from 8-36 percent, proportional to water usage measured last summer, and will take effect on June 1. Beginning in July, local districts that fail to meet their conservation requirement face fines of up to \$10,000 per day. Under previous emergency legislation, local districts also have the authority to fine individual residents caught violating the measures up to \$500 daily, effectively pitting neighbors against one another by encouraging reporting of wasteful consumers.

This is essentially a regressive and punitive consumption tax placed on working class families. A recent UCLA study found that wealthy neighborhoods in California on average use three times more water than working class communities, a discrepancy directly attributable to the acres of lawns and landscaping that adorn the properties of the rich who will have little problem absorbing any fines.

California’s agricultural industries account for roughly 80 percent of all potable water usage in the state, or 27 of the total

34 million acre feet of water used in California each year. However, Brown’s order only mentions agriculture in sections 12 and 13 and imposes no restrictions, let alone consumption fines or taxes on the largest enterprises.

Agricultural water suppliers responsible for farms 25,000 acres or larger are told to submit a “detailed drought management plan that describes the actions and measures the supplier will take to manage water demand during drought.” Those supplying water to farmland 10,000 to 25,000 acres do not need to “submit the plans to the Department until July 1st, 2016.”

The order does not require any usage reductions from agribusiness, and any measures taken by growers as part of their “drought management plan” are strictly voluntary.

When asked in an interview about the need to curtail agricultural water usage, Brown responded, “Then you’re putting government in a role of picking and choosing, maybe almonds instead of walnuts or tomatoes instead of rice. That is a big brother that outside of war or some unprecedented catastrophe shouldn’t even be considered.”

Brown has no trouble acting as “big brother” when it comes to regulating the water usage of working class residents. The governor refuses, however, to impinge in the slightest fashion on the profit interests of big business, and justifies this by insisting the present situation does not qualify as an “unprecedented catastrophe.”

In reality, it is the big agribusinesses that are holding the people of California hostage and sacrificing the needs of society to the single-minded drive to produce profits for top executives and wealthy investors. For all of Brown’s “environmentally progressive” posturing, he is nothing more than a tool of these corporate interests.

In response to the water shortage, growers are spending millions to drill ever-deeper groundwater wells, in order to gain access to the state’s natural aquifers, upon which they then draw water free of charge. As a result, naturally occurring arsenic is increasingly released from underground rock formations as the water level drops. The rising concentration of this cancer-causing element has rendered the drinking water unsafe for at least 255,000 people in 341 separate local water systems across the state, mostly in rural areas of the Central

Valley.

Groundwater aquifers throughout the Central Valley, the breadbasket of California, also show high levels of carcinogenic nitrates, which stem from farming chemicals and animal waste and are linked to thyroid cancer, skin rashes, hair loss and birth defects. The region's working class, largely Latino immigrant families, are hardest hit by aquifer contamination and spend as much as 10 percent of their already meager income on bottled water.

Governor Brown's Executive Order absolves agribusiness for their past and ongoing crimes because he and the entire political establishment directly benefit from their patronage. Stewart and Lynda Resnick, owners of the largest almond, pomegranate, pistachio and mandarin orange farms in the state, and who possess a combined net worth of over \$4.2 billion dollars, have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the campaign coffers of each of the last three governors.

Governor Brown directly rewarded agribusiness for their support last year, when the Super PAC raising funds for his election, "Brown for Governor 2014," donated over \$5 million to the "Yes on Prop. 1" campaign. Proposition 1 cut the total budget for all state agencies managing and overseeing water resources from \$11.14 billion down to \$7.12 billion. It furthermore allows the agribusinesses to use inefficient, but largely cheaper irrigation systems, and ignore more sustainable watering or farm management practices that would produce the most substantial reductions in water usage over time.

The Resnicks donated \$150,000 to the "Yes on Prop. 1" campaign, while the California Farm Bureau Federation and the Western Growers Service Association each donated \$250,000. Prop 1 passed in November last year after its proponents spent nearly \$22 million, compared to opponents of Prop. 1 who only raised \$101,149.

The entire framework for attempting to achieve water savings under capitalism turns reality on its head. The State Water Board has proposed an addition to Brown's restrictions, mandating that "The use of potable water outside of newly constructed homes and buildings that is not delivered by drip or micro-spray systems will be prohibited."

If the same principle of adopting universal drip irrigation and other more efficient technologies were applied where appropriate to agriculture, the water savings would dwarf any potential savings through urban conservation. Instead, these giant and obscenely wasteful monopolies are untouchable.

As water has become scarce over the duration of the ongoing drought, agribusiness has responded by concentrating production on high value cash crops such as fruits, nuts and hay. Almonds alone use roughly 3.4 million acre feet of water per year, 10 percent of the state's total usage, while alfalfa consumes roughly 6.8 million acre feet, or 20 percent of the state's total usage.

Alfalfa is by far the most water intensive crop, as a majority goes toward feeding the state's 1.8 million dairy cows, while

the state's horses come in close second. The most recent DWR data shows that 77.1 percent of all alfalfa is grown using the least efficient flood, or furrow, irrigation methods, while 17.9 percent is grown using inefficient sprinkler systems. A paltry 2.5 percent of alfalfa grown in the state uses the most water efficient drip irrigation methods. Transitioning to drip irrigation for this single crop would account for vastly more savings than those that will be realized by Brown's Executive Order.

Statewide, 43 percent of all crops are grown using the least efficient flood irrigation, 15.4 percent using slightly more efficient sprinkler systems, and 38.4 using the most efficient drip irrigation methods. The majority of crops grown in the state would grow as well or better using drip irrigation, and shifting all applicable crops to these highly efficient watering systems would yield immense water savings.

To fundamentally address the unprecedented drought crisis requires multiple, massive public works programs for both agricultural and urban sectors. Techniques exist to sustainably produce more food while using exponentially less water, including hydroponics and aquaponics, drip irrigation for applicable crops and remote sensing farm management technologies. At the same time, the universal use of water efficient showers and toilets, drought resistant lawns composed of native species, advanced water capture and recycling systems that span entire cities and modern pipe and sewage systems would greatly improve water usage.

Far from investing the necessary resources for the repair and renovation of the country's outmoded and decaying infrastructure, however, both Democrats and Republicans continue to starve it of necessary funds. The annual Pentagon budget- \$360 billion- is 6.3 times the amount of federal funding for infrastructure even as cities across the country are plagued with bursting water pipes and drainage systems dating back to the early 20th, if not late 19th centuries.

To give precedence to the needs of society--for modern infrastructure and the application of the latest developments in science and technology to address water usage, climate change and the preservation of the planet--the outmoded capitalist system must be abolished and economic and political life reorganized based on the socialist principle of production for human need, not profit. This includes the nationalization of the major agricultural monopolies and other large corporations under the democratic control of working people. For this, a mass political movement of the working class, independent of both big business parties, fighting for a workers' government and socialism, must be built.



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