

## Wiggins: Dry time for a solution

Contributed by Sen. Patricia Wiggins  
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California has always been a beacon of freedom. This is the land of the Barbary Coast, the music and culture of the sixties, the birthplace of the semiconductor and the biotech revolution. Freedom exists in our rural areas as well, where many folks choose to eschew the city and live on and from the land. Here you can still hunt and fish, here you're free to enjoy some of the greatest protected land and ocean areas in the world.

Water has led the way for the growth of California. Just add water, and you get a state with half its 38 million person population in its seven southernmost counties — the most arid part of our 100 million acres. Just add water, and you get an agricultural landscape that produces more than half the nation's fruit, nuts, and vegetables. This freedom to expand, to convert desert to both suburb and breadbasket, has been a hallmark of California's growth and success. But freedom today doesn't necessarily translate into freedom tomorrow — there's no free lunch.

When I travel the Second Senate District, people constantly talk about water. They note that water is intertwined with our valuable vineyards, and is the lifeline for the people. They stress that water is key to our declining fisheries, and that the rains and water table feed our superlative forests. And they express their real fears that Southern California is still on the prowl for our rivers and valleys to quench the thirst of growing cities and established agriculture.

This need for water creates an everlasting drought in California. While we speak in terms of "average" rainfall, we hide the fact that two out of three years are "below average." When we speak of "water needs" for agriculture and cities, we suggest that California can't be as productive without endless diversion of water from the northern and Sierra rivers to the deserts of the state.

We must get beyond the concept that there is only so much water, and that the cities, farms and fish must fight it out. Rather than continue with this struggle, we must tap the well of ideas to find the abundance that we Californians are so lucky to have.

Cities and farms must support water conservation in their zoning, choice of plants, application methods and water sources. In agriculture, this may mean selecting plant varieties and rootstocks that are less thirsty, and monitoring the soil to restrict over-watering. In cities, this may mean giving up traditional lawn mixes for less water intensive grasses, and developing gardens that reflect the native ecosystem. Rain barrels, cisterns and thrifty appliances all help as well — provided that cities and counties allow them.

I have been concerned about water and growth for a long time. As an Assemblywoman, I introduced AB 2924 in 2002. That measure would have required local government approval before water could be shipped out of the Russian, Eel or other watersheds to the north. While that bill failed to become law, I subsequently introduced a new and improved bill, AB 858, requiring study of any proposed diversion of greater than 500 acre-feet per year, which was signed by then-Gov. Gray Davis.

The state still struggles to develop groundwater laws, following the lead of forward-thinking counties like Napa. While the state still is hesitant to suggest curbs to water use, the State Water Resources Control Board has placed a significant conservation goal in this drought year for the Sonoma County Water Agency. The state is still unsure about "fixing" the Delta with a peripheral canal, and rumors still persist that the Eel and other North Coast rivers are at the heart of plans to move yet more water south.

Why let our permanent drought achieve crisis status, when we know it will persist in California for the foreseeable future? Why do we cling to a landscape of lawns in the desert? Why can't the use of water be rationally shared, rather than continued as a competition between old users, new users, groundwater users, and the state and federal governments fulfilling contracts written in a fog of abundance?

Where the state fails (generally due to veto), the counties need to act. Groundwater, water conservation and land use all may come under the purview of counties and local, special districts. Agricultural practices can be made more thrifty with help from University Extension and the farm advisor. Gardens can be more efficient with permission from cities and support from the community and master gardener network. And stream flows and the wildlife dependent on them can be protected by land trusts, parks, water districts and effective zoning.

Freedom is why people come to and stay in California. But we are not free to waste water, to take others' resources or devastate the environment for personal or corporate convenience. And when others do that, it limits our own freedom. Fortunately, we still have the freedom to innovate — and that will be our solution.

Patricia Wiggins (D-Santa Rosa) represents California's 2nd Senate District, made up of portions or all of six counties: Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, Napa, Solano and Sonoma. She chairs the legislature's Joint Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture.