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Environment

California Needs to Act Now to Avoid a Water Crisis

By [Dr. Reese Halter](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [December 12, 2007](#).

With an antiquated water system, a growing population, and the pressure of global warming, California is in trouble.

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Lawmakers in Sacramento need to understand the role of water in California. An antiquated water system designed for 20 million inhabitants combined with global warming and a burgeoning population are three valid reasons why the legislator must act quickly and decisively.

Currently southern California is experiencing its worst drought since the inception of record keeping in 1877. The 2007 snowpack along the eastern Sierra Nevada's, which supplies up to 90 percent of LA's drinking water, was the second lowest recorded. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Water District is currently buying billions of gallons of water from farmers to secure water for the cities 16 million denizens.

The Hetch-Hetchy reservoir in the heart of the Yosemite National Park draws its water from the Tuolumne River and the snowpack run off from the Sierra Nevada's accounts for 85 percent of the drinking water for the city of San Francisco. Climate modelers from Stanford and UCLA predict that by 2050 summers will be significantly hotter with faster depletion of the snowpacks resulting in reduced supply of water from the Sierras, by at least 35 percent.

Moreover, a 20 year study of the health of the Sierra forests showed that as temperatures have risen over the past two decades, so too has a dramatic mortality rate of sapling and trees induced by drought. Mature forest are very important because amongst other things they help retain snow and they release it slowly in the springtime and filter it as it moves through their roots.

A Smokey Bear fire suppression policy has changed the composition and structure of the forests in California and throughout the West. Tens of millions of white fir and incense cedars now carpet the forest floor throughout our state. Their foliage is highly flammable.

A drier California is more prone to massive wildfires, senseless loss of life and billions of dollars in damages. Recently some 49 homes were incinerated in the Malibu fires. In October, southern California was an inferno.

A warming world has caused the Santa Ana winds, which normally

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A warming world has caused the Santa Ana winds, which normally occur from September to January, an opportunity to occur in every month of the year since January 2005. Essentially, our state has been on wildfire alert for the past 23 months.

California has the eight mightiest economy in the world. A \$32 billion-a-year intensive agriculture industry solely relies upon a secure water supply to produce food.

Currently California has a population of 37 million people. By 2050 there will be 60 million people residing in our state.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and Senator Don Perata are proposing a water bill that will address restoring the Sacramento and San Joaquin delta, repairing the levees, adding three reservoirs and redoing California's decaying infra-structure in order to accommodate the state well past the middle of this century.

The cost of this project is at least \$10 billion. It is a crucial expenditure that our state must incur.

Global warming has brought with it a drier world. Beijing, Perth, Sydney, London and now New York City are faced with having to recycle sewage treatment water for re-use as tap water. Atlanta, a city of 5.5 million people, is within 100 days of running out of fresh drinking water. These are the current realities of rising greenhouse gases.

As California moves into a drier world, the need to secure water for its inhabitants is of paramount importance. The leadership role exemplified by the lawmakers in Sacramento on AB 32 -- a carbon constrained economy is laudable; but now they must act accordingly to ensure water for California's future.

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Dr. Reese Halter is the founder of [Global Forest Science](#).

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