

**Statement by Mark Cowin, Director, Department of Water Resources on January 31, 2014:**

Thank you for joining us here today.

My name is Mark Cowin, and I am Director of the California Department of Water Resources. Our department is responsible for planning for and managing our State's water resources, including , including operating the California's State Water Project, which stores and delivers water to more than 25 million Californians and about 1,000 square miles of irrigated farmland.

On January 17, Governor Brown issued an Emergency Proclamation of Drought, in response to what is projected to be the driest year on record.

This is not a "coming" crisis or an "evolving" crisis. It is a current crisis. Consider these facts:

- 17 water agencies across the state are in danger of running out of drinking water in 60 to 100 days. More agencies will be added to this list weekly.
- Our most recent snowpack survey, conducted yesterday, showed snowpack is 12% of normal levels for this time of year. This snowpack level is far less than even the snowpack levels during the state's worst droughts in modern history.
- Wildfire risk has spiked. Since January 1, 400 fires have burned across the state. Last year, we had zero fires during January.

Simply put, there is very little water in the state's rivers and reservoirs:

- Most of California's reservoirs are well below their average capacity for this time of year— overall reservoir capacities are the lowest they have been since the 1970s. A few examples include: Shasta 36%; Lake Oroville 36%; and here close to home, Folsom Lake 17%.
- Many of California's rivers and streams, which provide essential habitat for endangered and threatened species, are running very low. In response, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife has closed several rivers to fishing and will ask the Fish and Game Commission to close other rivers to fishing next week.
- Farmers that rely on surface water for irrigation are faced with the decision to plant crops amidst great uncertainty whether state and federal water infrastructure will be able to deliver any of the water they need to supplement local supplies to grow their crops.

The small amount of rain and snow that have fallen in Northern California the last couple days is “less than a drop in the bucket” amidst the current drought. Considering that we’re two-thirds through the wet season, the State would have to experience heavy rainfall and snowfall every other day through May to near average precipitation totals. And even then, we would still be in a drought due to recent dry years.

One of the most important lessons from our previous record-dry years such as 1976-1977, is that delay exacerbates the effects of drought.

So today we are here to announce aggressive actions that, first and foremost, protect public health and safety. That means making sure that the state maintains its ability to protect water quality for Californians who rely in whole or in part on the Delta have adequate, clean drinking water.

Just like the Governor has asked all Californians to conserve water around their homes, we’re taking the same actions for the State on a much larger scale.

Everyone who relies in whole or in part on project water – farmers, fish and people in cities and towns – will get less water as a result of today’s actions. Simply put, there is not enough water to go around, so we need to conserve.

In terms of specific actions, I am announcing that the Department of Water Resources is adjusting its initial allocation of 5% of contracted water supplies to 0% to State Water Project contractors south of the Delta – from the Bay Area, to Los Angeles, to San Diego and Kern County. This means that we are projecting no water delivered from the State Water Project if conditions persist, except for limited water supplies that were saved by some agencies last year and are in storage south of the Delta in San Luis Reservoir, and minimal deliveries for human health and safety purposes as we identify those needs.

This is the first time in the 54 year history of the state water project that projected water supplies from the State Water Project for both urban and agricultural uses have been reduced to zero. These areas will need to continue to heed the call for water conservation and rely on water saved in groundwater basins and local reservoirs, as well from recycled water and storm water capture.

Our department is also notifying its settlement contractors along the Feather River that, per their contracts with the State of California, their supplies are likely to be reduced by 50%. These contracts are mostly with rice farmers.

In addition to these actions, my Department and the Bureau of Reclamation have submitted a petition to the State Water Resources Control Board to adjust operations to address the current severe drought conditions in two ways.

First our petition asks the State Water Board to let us slow down the release of the little water we have stored, because otherwise regulations would require us to release that water now. The amount usually required to be released from reservoirs at this time of year was set assuming a dry year, but not a drought of this magnitude. The slower release that we are requesting will meet basic standards to keep salt water from the San Francisco Bay from overtaking our freshwater delta, which is the main hub of the state's water supply. Keeping the saltwater out makes sure we can keep delivering a minimum of water to people, allows some fish to migrate, and saves our precious storage for later in the year for families, farmers, and fish.

Failing to take this action could result in our reservoirs running out of water later in the year, which means no available water flow to prevent saltwater intrusion in the Delta. That would result in ruined water supplies for users, both in the Delta and south of the Delta, and major environment impacts.

Our petition also asking the State Water Board to let us open and close a key gate called the Cross-Channel Gate in the Delta that's usually closed all this time of year. When this gate is closed, it protects migrating fish, and when it's open, it allows more fresh water into the interior delta that helps push salty water back towards the ocean. Usually, there is enough inflow to the Delta from other channels to push the salty water back. But with current low inflows, opening the cross channel gate periodically will be necessary to protect water quality in the Delta. Our petition calls for operating the gate with more flexibility, to push out salt or to protect fish based on real-time conditions.

The actions I've just described and the petition to the State Water Board are largely unprecedented, but also unavoidable.