

California drought a 'biblical curse'?

by Pamela Lowry

Considering California Gov. Pete Wilson's (R) rhetoric recently, in which he compared California's current drought to a "biblical curse" and stated, "If I'm to fulfill my place in history I'm going to have to learn how to make wine into water," one might expect the reaction to such an epochal disaster to be the formulation of long-delayed comprehensive water development policies. So far, however, reactions vary from draconian water restrictions to local efforts to save whatever can be saved of a particular patch of parched earth.

Water restriction regulations were promulgated one after the other in late January with such breathtaking speed that they threatened to set up a domino effect, especially in California's embattled agricultural sector. No sooner did the State Water Project inform the Southern California Metropolitan Water District (MWD) on Jan. 29 that it would cut the amount of water it supplies to MWD by 85% if drought conditions continued critical, then the MWD informed its 27 client water agencies (which include Los Angeles and San Diego) that it would ask its board on Feb. 12 to allow a 31% reduction in water deliveries. Immediately, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley requested of the city council the toughest water-rationing measures in the city's history, beginning with a 10% reduction (from 1986 levels) in residential water usage on March 1, and escalating to 15% by May 1.

Just days after farmers jammed a hearing at the State Water Resources Control Board in Sacramento, demanding a relaxation in water quality standards so that more agricultural water could be diverted from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the State Water Project announced on Feb. 4 that it was suspending all agricultural water deliveries, and Governor Wilson disclosed that federal water deliveries would be cut by two-thirds.

The collapse of California agriculture

California produces about half of the national fruit and vegetable supply. Last year, according to Jason Peltier of the Central Valley Project Water Association, 500,000 acres of California farmland were forced out of production. This year, he projects that as much as 1.5-2 million acres could be elimi-

nated. California has 10 million acres of planted farmland. "It's going to be very severe on the local economies, not to mention that prices on some of these crops are going to be increasing," said Assemblyman Jim Costa (D-Fresno), who represents a heavily agricultural area.

But it is not just the productive capacity of California agriculture which is in danger of collapsing—it is the land itself. Faced with no water from the State Water Project, and very little from federal supplies, farmers will be forced to tap into already-depleted groundwater supplies. Officials from the Santa Clara Water Valley District state that it is possible to draw only 120,000 acre-feet of water from underground reserves before the ground literally begins to sink. Such subsidence occurs when underground sand and gravel aquifers compress to fill the void caused as water is pumped out. Damage from cracked water pipes, crumbled building foundations, and collapsed well casings would be incalculable.

A city-farm alliance?

Despite environmentalist efforts to characterize farmers, who use about 85% of the state's water, as greedy water-wasters, a recent poll by the *Los Angeles Times* shows that city dwellers are not buying the big lie. Not only are farmers viewed as the group least likely to waste water, but only 10% of those polled thought that drought problems would be solved by ordering farmers to use less water.

Although not as immediately threatened by water-starvation as are farmers, city-dwellers are growing increasingly concerned. The state Water Resources Control Board is considering regulations to limit household water use to 300 gallons a day. Water officials say one person uses between 100-200 gallons a day, depending on the climate, so large families would suffer more under the projected rationing. In addition, the fines awaiting city council approval in Los Angeles for water "overusage," can mount, after three violations, to \$4 per billing unit (748 gallons) plus 75% of the total water bill.

Waiting in the wings are anti-population bills such as the one filed by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Ruth Galanter, which gives the city council the power to restrict or cut off new water hookups. A spokesman for Mayor Bradley stated that the mayor opposes the bill because "it will worsen the recession." However, Bradley's own rationing plan allows the Department of Water and Power to counter repeated violations of water rationing by restricting or cutting off the flow of water to any home or business.

Under these conditions, a pro-development city-farm coalition could rapidly emerge in the state legislature, which may partly explain the motivation behind a new bill put forward by "New Age" House Speaker Willie Brown (D). The legislation would consolidate California's cities and counties into regional bodies where appointed officials would deal with development and environmental issues unhampered by any responsibility to increasingly enraged voters.