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## **Making the Most of the Water You Have,**

In the midst of the worst drought on record, some California communities are showing that there's plenty that can be done.

It's February, normally one of California's wettest months. Yet Caltrans, the state's transportation department, is using its huge messaging signs above freeways to announce "Serious Drought — Help Save Water." An usual message for a transportation department, but it's an unusual year for California: its driest on record.

Assuming rainfall doesn't pick up significantly, a wide spectrum of repercussions will be in store for residents across the state, particularly those in northern California. While most of California's water resources exist in the north, many communities in that region are less prepared to deal with the drought than are those in southern California.

For example, the small city of Willits, located north of San Francisco, is already at its most severe water-rationing level and is actively seeking alternate water sources. Yet rainfall for Willits averages 51 inches a year — more than three times that of Los Angeles. Under serious though slightly less critical circumstances, the city council of Sacramento in January enacted severe water rationing for residents and businesses. Sacramento sits at the confluence of the Sacramento and American rivers and has water rights to both, but major reservoirs on the rivers that capture rain and snowmelt are at less than 20 percent of normal capacity.

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles to the south, managers of the huge Metropolitan Water District (MWD) that supplies water to more than 19 million people and the majority of southern California's cities say they have enough reserves to get the state's most populous region through the year and even into 2015 without rationing.

Setting aside the Golden State's fascinating and contentious water history (broadly centered on the transfer of water from north to south) there is an existing, complex supply system in place that supports residents, businesses and agriculture. None will be spared the effects of the drought, so there are lessons to be learned from water-delivery agencies and communities that have prepared more aggressively for shortfalls in supply. An array of best practices is already in place in communities across the state.

For example, the city of Los Angeles has for many years metered and charged for water use. In contrast, Sacramento is in a multiyear process of installing water meters; roughly half of its residents are still charged a flat rate independent of usage. Additionally, L.A. provides a \$2-per-square-foot incentive to remove water-intensive lawns, mandates low-flow water fixtures and promotes an ongoing conservation campaign. The city's per-capita water use has dropped from 187 gallons a day in 1986 to 123 gallons. L.A. uses less water than it did 40 years ago despite the addition of more than 1 million residents.

In terms of hard infrastructure, the MWD has invested heavily in building reservoirs to enlarge capacity. The district recently announced record storage levels throughout the system, which in

addition to the reservoirs includes banked supplies underground and in Lake Mead.

The city of Long Beach has taken a technology approach: Its water department is engaged in one of the most aggressive recycled-water-system expansions in the state. Recycled water is being used to displace millions of gallons of imported potable water to irrigate city parks, golf courses, cemeteries and athletic fields. When complete, this system will more than double recycled water use in Long Beach and meet 12 percent of the city's total water demand.

The San Diego Water Authority is taking resilience to a whole new level through the construction of a desalination plant. When the new facility is completed, it will not only provide 7 to 10 percent of the region's water but will add an important resource to its diversification strategy. Most significantly from a resiliency perspective, water from the plant will be provided completely independent of the broader region's seasonal snow or rainfall levels.

These examples serve to highlight that a community's ability to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions — whether they be drought or other circumstances — can be vastly improved through an array of soft infrastructure (such as policies and regulations), hard infrastructure and technology. As those Caltrans freeway signs suggest, there are plenty of things that can be done.

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