

HUEY D. JOHNSON

Free water

THERE'S ONE CITY in this state where water use is unlimited because government has selfishly resisted the idea of installing water meters. Guess which city.

Sacramento.

Water meters are important tools for managing water use. Having them on our public buildings and homes cuts water waste in a city by as much as 20% because it relies on a simple principle: When we pay for what we use, we don't waste as much.

Our state capital adamantly stands by its tradition of sucking up all the water it wants, at no additional cost. There is even a requirement in its city charter making water meters illegal. And Sacramento recently helped kill a bill in the state Legislature that would have required water meters on all city buildings throughout the state.

This shows a sleazy lack of leadership by the capital of a desert state, and adds to the image of California as delusional and self-indulgent. California has had to face increasingly serious water shortages, as the Bay Area's on-and-off

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water rationing will attest. Yet the people and pols in Sacramento aren't about to volunteer to live like the rest of us. They like their abundant green grass. As a former mayor of Sacramento stated, merely suggesting water meters would be political suicide for a Sacramento politician.

Water meters are of course a small part of managing the state's water shortage. The vast amounts of water used for farm irrigation and keeping Los Angeles lawns green are bigger issues. However, conservation succeeds when it starts with a simple, achievable objective. Having Sacramento put in water meters is a clear leverage point for larger change.

At the moment, Sacramento is instead doing its hell-bent best to become the next Los Angeles, a cancerous condition that is going to consume more and more water as the buildings go up. We can't save the Delta and the Bay, or the salmon and striped bass, without Sacramento accepting the idea of water limits. The Federal Bureau of Reclamation is trying to block the required water that would maintain cold temperatures for the coming salmon run in the Sacramento River, because the water is needed for development. If the bureau succeeds this fall, 40,000 spawning salmon and their millions of eggs could die.

It is time to change the hoary, outdated practices put in place when California had one quarter the number of people it has now. Change won't be easy. There are special interests that like water policy the way it is. The Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA) is an example. ACWA is a home base for the powerful water bureaucracy whose objective is always to get more water. Like the highway building juggernaut of old, ACWA has money to affect the political process.

With that kind of opposition, we could ask Willie Brown to lead the challenge. As Assembly speaker, he has the clout to get the job done, and he has professed an interest in saving the Delta and Bay. It may take a statewide ballot referendum to gain needed sensible state water conservation policy.

The savings are worth the effort. The state can save 25 percent of the current water being used by requiring conservation practices in its cities and farms.

Unlimited water use for Sacramento residents is a tradition that supports the false belief that there are no limits. We must get a grip on water as our most serious limited resource and manage it for the good of our environment and economy.

As part of the process, new orders need to be tattooed on the water buffaloes (an endearing term for the old-line water bureaucracy): Do not send more water but manage and conserve what we have.