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Making money by saving water

WATER, THE essential element for living in a desert like the American West, is about to get attention that's long overdue. The impetus is the discovery by some communities that while easily saving huge quantities of water, they can also save huge numbers of tax dollars.

This is an inspiring opportunity for cities to take the lead in re-establishing our wild heritage and returning water to re-create verdant vitality to thousands of watershed acres that have become desert moonscape.

There has always been a feeling of accomplishment in conserving lots of water in times of drought. That kind of caring needs to be extended on a permanent basis. It's a new way of life that carries no hardship and actually saves money. And it will prove we care as if the future for our children and wildlife mattered.

For example, San Jose has a 4-year-old plan that helps each of its 200,000 plus homeowners become more efficient water users. Simple new techniques, like low-flush toilets and low-flow shower heads are already saving an average of 30 gallons per home per day.

The city's goal is to save \$100

million dollars in taxes over 10 years by reducing water use in the city by 10 percent.

Reducing water use means reducing the amount of water pumped for miles to taps and toilets, and then pumped to sewer plants. Pumping water through pipes is the largest daily use of electricity in California. Saving electricity saves oil and that means a bonus of cleaner air.

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wash away a national disgrace by restoring urgently needed wildlife habitat.

Our water problems began decades ago, when laws divided and limited available water to two purposes: Real estate development and

agricultural irrigation. That meant water for wildlife wasn't included as a legal use. Those water laws are now changing, slowly, state by state, but there still has been no provision in the laws to recover some of the available water for nature. We have in-name-only federal wetland refuges and streams as dry as the Sahara as a result.

NOW IS THE time to change all that. It's an ethical decision. Some developers will still say that water is for human use only, and that letting water flow free to the sea is wasting it. But that's not right and now the public understands and cares. Quality of life issues are involved, including human recreation.

The good news is that there will be enough water to share equally if the issues are addressed promptly by political leaders.

Like the city of San Jose, the state of Oregon has moved ahead of the federal government. It has a nice new law that requires 25 percent of the water saved be returned to its natural source, where it is to flow forever.

Oregon's law assures permanence for flowing rivers and healthy wildlife refuges, and also

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allows for recreational boating and others uses of its waterways.

California and the nation should follow this example. There will be no second chance. Certainly there will be no painless way to save our threatened migratory bird refuges, so that curlews and wild geese can survive a thousand coming winters, and our recreational streams can flow for salmon and steelhead spawning, as well as for the pleasure and productivity of people.

The potential savings of millions of tax dollars in each community will, I predict, move fiscally stressed cities and regions of the nation to follow San Jose's example. And that will mean lots of new water.

Communities like Marin County would do well to study San Jose's and Oregon's improved water management plans, instead of crying out for more water to be shipped from Sonoma or elsewhere.