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Is the Drought Emergency Over?

It seems almost comical to ask whether the state's drought emergency should be lifted while 50 of 58 counties in California are also under State of Emergency for flooding.

The levity is appreciated because it's been pretty serious business since Governor Brown declared the Drought State of Emergency in 2014. The Municipal Water District of Orange County, the wholesale water provider that serves 2.2 million people, worked successfully with our 28 member agencies and with the public, to reduce water consumption and meet the seemingly random conservation goals set by the State Water Resources Control Board.

Orange County exceeded the conservation mandates because our residents, our ratepayers, took the message of conservation to heart. They listened to the call for conservation because they trusted what they heard from their public agencies.

That success though, came with great consequences. There were financial repercussions, as millions was pumped into conservation and outreach campaigns. It also caused political discomfort, as districts were forced to raise rates to offset lower water sales due to the mandatory conservation.

Public trust is the primary reason it is imperative the Governor lifts the declared Drought State of Emergency. Otherwise, it would cause the trust and credibility we have with the public to dry up. We will need that trust if forced to return to conservation measures when the rain stops falling again – and we know it will. Periods of prolonged drought interrupted by heavy rains has become the new normal for California.

We will also need the public's trust as we move forward with the California WaterFix and EcoRestore, two projects that will protect the California Delta and our ability to move storm water from the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers to Southern California. The WaterFix is the single most important project to get us off the drought-flood seesaw and stabilizing our water supplies.

To continue a State of Emergency in the face of floods, overflowing reservoirs and with people jet skiing down Orange County streets on the evening news, will only hurt our credibility. If we lose the public's trust, we lose the single-most valuable asset we have when striving to meet our conservation and water-supply goals.

The state should protect that trust and lift the declared drought emergency, which will allow us to focus on communicating the message that water use efficiency is a way of life. The state needs to trust that the public and local water agencies will continue to behave as responsibly in the future as they have in the past. To do anything else would be comedy with tragic implications.

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