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# Building Drought Resilience in California's Cities and Suburbs



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Droughts are a recurring feature of California’s climate. Major droughts provide an opportunity to review management responses and derive policy lessons that can better prepare society for the next one. Here we take stock of how California’s cities and suburbs have responded to recent droughts, review the state’s evolving role in urban drought management, and recommend actions to increase urban areas’ drought resilience.

California’s urban water supply system is complex and highly decentralized, with 400-plus utilities serving more than 90 percent of the state’s residents. Following the hard lessons learned from the 1976–77 and 1987–92 droughts, these utilities made substantial investments in drought resilience. This included diversifying supplies with new surface and underground storage, interconnections with neighboring suppliers, recycled wastewater, and water transfer agreements, as well as freeing up supplies by reducing indoor water use. Consequently, urban water suppliers generally believed they were prepared as the state entered a five-year drought in 2012.

The state has also played essential roles in building urban drought resilience since the late 1970s by strengthening local water planning requirements, providing financial assistance, and fostering voluntary water trading to help move supplies to areas experiencing the worst shortages. But concerns about the latest drought’s severity prompted the state to intervene in new ways. In particular, it adopted a more hands-on approach to short-term demand management—a key part of drought resilience strategies that had traditionally been left to local authorities. And in 2015, the state took the unprecedented step of ordering an across-the-board mandate for urban water conservation.

Although California’s residents overwhelmingly responded to the mandate, the policy generated significant discord between the state and local water suppliers—entities that need to work well together to protect the state’s residents and economy from the worst effects of drought. Perhaps more importantly, it muddied the waters in terms of state and local roles and responsibilities going forward. If left unaddressed, this uncertainty could undermine effective planning and response to future droughts.

Actions in the following five areas can clarify this process and improve urban drought resilience going forward:

- **Coordinating water shortage contingency planning and implementation:** The misalignment between state and local views on local drought preparedness reflects an information gap. The state should avoid the “better safe than sorry” approach it took with the mandate and rely instead on a “trust but verify” policy. The stress test the state