

PD Editorial: Bring better science to dam management

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Is the drought over?

We won't match wits with meteorologists or second guess climate scientists. For now, we're just grateful to see Lake Pillsbury, Lake Mendocino and other reservoirs rising again after three exceedingly dry years.

Refreshed by 15 days of rain so far this month, Lake Sonoma's water supply pool has surpassed 70 percent of capacity for the first time in six months.

More striking is the change at Lake Mendocino — illustrated by Press Democrat photographer Kent Porter's photos on the front page of Tuesday's paper. The lake, which had fallen to about 40 percent of capacity, now stands at 66.6 percent.

If the lakes keep filling, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers may be forced to open the spillways at Coyote Dam to fulfill flood-prevention mandates — even if weather forecasters say the storm window is closing.

Federal law doesn't leave any option.

A Lake Mendocino management plan developed in the 1950s — before satellites and computer modeling — dictates maximum water levels on specific dates. If the lake rises beyond the designated point, water must be released, even if there isn't any expectation of rain.

That scenario played out in January, to the chagrin of local water managers facing a third drought year. Having no other legal option, the Corps drained 24,000 acre-feet of water — about 7.8 billion gallons — from Lake Mendocino, contributing to critical shortages this past spring in southern Mendocino and northern Sonoma counties.

The Bureau of Reclamation, the other major federal water management agency, has much more flexibility in managing its projects.

To better fulfill the dual mandates of preventing floods and supplying water, Lake Mendocino's managers need relief from a pre-Sputnik matrix that dictates water levels without regard to modern science.

Changing the management plan requires an act of Congress.

Legislation introduced by Rep. Jared Huffman of San Rafael and other Northern California Democrats would have, among other things, allowed local water purveyors to request a review by the Corps and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, with the goal of updating management plans to reflect the latest and best science.

Unfortunately, the drought relief bill passed by the House on Dec. 9 didn't address the issue. Instead, it sought to boost water deliveries to San Joaquin Valley growers by eliminating protection for endangered salmon. Fortunately for Indian tribes and coastal communities that rely on salmon fishing, that bill is DOA in the Senate.

Huffman plans to re-introduce his bill when the new Congress convenes in January. Enacting it would benefit communities across the country.

Over the past three years, many people sacrificed their lawns, drove dirty cars, took shorter showers — whatever they could manage to conserve water. Communities promoted purple-pipe recycling and rainwater capture systems. Voters approved billions of dollars to clean up contaminated groundwater and recharge aquifers.

Even if the drought is over, experts say it will take time, perhaps years, to replenish natural water stores. So conservation efforts should continue at all levels. And that means giving reservoir managers the tools they need to make wise choices about saving and releasing water.