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[What to Do About Hetch Hetchy More conservation, not capacity](#)

- Jenna Olsen

Friday, August 5, 2005

This summer, waterfalls that normally trickle instead roar, rivers surge through their channels at higher flows than usual, and the fishing is outstanding. Vacationers are soaking in the glories of rivers like the spectacular Tuolumne, which flows through Yosemite National Park, the Stanislaus National Forest and the Central Valley.

Only in years such as this, with exceptionally abundant snowpack and water, do we see California's rivers and bays approximating the health and splendor they displayed before they were dammed and diverted to provide water for families, farms and businesses. While the Golden State's highly engineered water system has brought benefits, it has also come at a great cost.

Today, we know that removing water from rivers has many negative consequences, including polluted water, extinct fish species and devastated natural areas. Hurting our rivers hurts us.

For a balanced water future, conservation is the cheapest, easiest and least destructive way to meet future water needs. In fact, the state's recent water plan promotes water efficiency as a fundamental action for a sustainable water supply. Water agencies need to build more conservation into our systems, not more capacity.

Given the Bay Area's culture of technological innovation and concern with environmental sustainability, you would think that the region would be a leader in efficient water use. Not so. In fact, San Francisco lags far behind Los Angeles in implementing water-saving measures such as low-flow toilets and fixtures.

Instead, San Francisco is planning a \$500 million pipeline that would allow it to withdraw 70 percent more water from the Tuolumne than it takes today. This project placed the Tuolumne on a list of the 10 most endangered rivers of 2005 by American Rivers, a national conservation organization.

Taking more water from the Tuolumne would destroy important habitat for trout, bald eagles, salmon and bears. Less water in the Tuolumne means less freshwater flowing into the Delta and San Francisco Bay, and less ability to dilute pollution there.

The pipeline project is part of a \$4.3 billion program to upgrade San Francisco's water system, paid for by water rate increases in San Francisco and surrounding communities. Sold to voters as a seismic-safety program, the plan has become burdened with projects such as the pipeline to expand the ability to withdraw Tuolumne water.

San Francisco does not have to degrade the Tuolumne to meet its water needs. San Francisco's own preliminary reports identify conservation and recycling potential equaling half of its current Tuolumne imports.

Conservation means eliminating water waste and using less water to accomplish the same goals. Efficient household fixtures, such as washing machines, play an important role. Modernizing industrial uses, improving processes in restaurants and hotels, and installing smarter landscape irrigation systems are other examples.

Other agencies have avoided environmental harm through conservation:

-- Seattle, with a water system comparable to San Francisco's, has kept water use constant despite population growth of 30 percent since 1975.

-- Bostonians reduced water use 30 percent over the past 15 years and eliminated the need for a new dam.

-- Metropolitan Water District of Southern California decreased water use by 16 percent from 1990 to 2003 despite a 14 percent increase in population.

Increased capacity does not protect San Francisco from droughts. Building a new pipeline would make San Francisco more reliant on the Tuolumne River, which is unreliable during droughts. Climate change could make the Tuolumne system even less dependable in the future.

San Francisco has so far proposed modest efforts to increase the use of conservation and recycled water, with more aggressive efforts in the planning stage. The city needs the cooperation of the 28 agencies that purchase Tuolumne water from them. These agencies (located in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties) share the risks of not making appropriate investment in conservation. According to a recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California, "greater regional collaboration" among such agencies would enable them to "join forces and build a broader portfolio of water supply options."

The message to San Francisco is clear: Invest in water conservation, not more capacity. Conservation is less expensive, faster and more secure. San Francisco and its water consumers should be a model of conscientious and environmentally friendly water use, not practitioners of outdated engineering feats that harm our rivers and bays.

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