

Managing Drought in a Changing Climate

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As San Francisco began welcoming visitors arriving for this week's Global Action Climate Summit, the PPIC Water Policy Center hosted an event on the impact of climate change on California's water system.

The Monday event brought together a panel of experts to discuss reforms that could improve resilience and galvanize action to prepare for future droughts. The panelists were Maria Herrera, who works on water issues for Self-Help Enterprises and is a member of the California Water Commission; Felicia Marcus, chair of the State Water Board; Cannon Michael, president of Bowles Farming Company; and Tim Ramirez, a member of the Central Valley Flood Protection Board. The panel was moderated by Greg Dalton, founder and host of Climate One.

Ellen Hanak, director of the center, kicked off the evening with a summary of new research by PPIC on managing drought in a changing climate. After noting that California is already seeing changes from a warming climate, she said that "a lot of things we're recommending are going to be very important and very useful as soon as we can do them." She reviewed the report's four main suggested areas of reform: plan ahead, modernize the water grid, update water allocation rules, and find the money to pay for these reforms. "It's a plan that would be great for the next governor," she said.

Dalton launched the panel discussion with a question about the need to modernize the state's water grid—the network of above- and below-ground storage and conveyance systems that connects most water uses in the state. Ramirez said that the conveyance system needs updating because it is "totally insufficient for the precipitation we have now." For example, the San Joaquin River system "was plumbed for snowmelt—very predictable, slow runoff—but

that's not what happens anymore." He discussed the need for expanded floodplain capacity to help absorb floods.

Marcus said, "The answer is to maximize every drop—figuring out how every molecule of water ... can be used over and over again and used for multiple things." She said improved information and modernizing our thinking about infrastructure are steps toward achieving this goal.

Herrera noted that disadvantaged rural communities, which are most likely to face drought-related water shortages, find it difficult to engage in discussions about the water system. She called for ensuring that local communities are included in decision making about water grid upgrades, and added that they should have a say in "where to place storage, how water that is stored gets used and allocated, and for what benefits."

Other topics of discussion included addressing growing wildfire risk; ensuring safe, reliable drinking water for the most vulnerable communities; advice for the next governor on managing climate volatility (Marcus: "the key is to pick up the baton and run with it... [Water] is an issue on which leadership can make a difference on so many things"), and ways to reduce conflict over water.

Cannon Michael seconded the need for leadership to tackle climate change—and urged all Californians to heed that call. "We need to think about the California we have, what an amazing state this is, and lead from that. We've got to push past the voices that are trying to drag us apart, and work on solutions from the middle. We can solve any problem that we all put our minds together on."