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# ELIAS: State's water woes flashback to 1970s

By THOMAS D. ELIAS

We are starting to see the summer water picture for California ---- and it's looking a lot like the late 1970s. Or, to put it another way, it's beginning to look a lot like Bolinas almost did.

That's right, chances are much of the rest of California will soon be following the plan put in place and later rescinded by Bolinas, the funky town not too far north of San Francisco in coastal Marin County. Best known for its populace of aging hippies, artists, lawyers and others seeking refuge from crowded urban life, Bolinas was rescued by an unexpected late-March storm that suddenly refilled its key reservoir.

Bolinas isn't often first with anything. But because it has no access to supplies from the state Water Project, the federal Central Valley Project or the San Francisco-owned Hetch Hetchy reservoir system and aqueduct, Bolinas uses only local supplies.

Before the unexpected late-season rains, the key Bolinas reservoir was at risk of running dry before the next rainy season, likely to start in November or December.

So Bolinas adopted California's toughest water rules: Residents were to use no more than 150 gallons per day, 4,500 per month. That amounted to about a 25 percent cutback from normal usage of about 208 gallons per day per water hookup. Violate the rule once or twice and nothing much would happen to residents. But supplies could be cut off on a third violation.

The Bolinas rules are now in abeyance, but they were only a little bit tougher than what many other places might soon be seeing, despite a few late rains.

In the Central Valley, cities like Folsom and Roseville are weighing water use cutbacks. Farmers are fallowing fields because allocations from the state Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project remain low. The East Bay Municipal Utility District, covering much of Alameda and Contra Costa counties, has now raised prices because water use there has been cut back so much. That's right: Use less and pay more.

But the most visible water-use reductions might be coming soon in Los Angeles, which has its own aqueduct running from the Owens Valley on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Despite heavier than usual rains in February and March, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has not backed off proposed water use restrictions involving a tiered pricing system punishing consumers and businesses that fail to conserve even beyond today's levels, which see average use down almost 15 percent from the levels of the 1960s.

"The level of severity of this drought is still severe," he said. "We have to move quickly."

No one can be sure whether Villaraigosa's plan was not at least partially motivated by politics. Just re-elected to a new four-year term as mayor he had been seen as a strong contender for the Democratic Party's nomination for governor, until he back out of the race last month. Had he entered, he would have been the only Southern Californian in a crowded field running for an office that's been held exclusively by Southern California politicians since the 1960s.

No Los Angeles mayor, not even the long-serving Sam Yorty or Tom Bradley, has ever been elected governor. That's been partly because of regional animosity stemming from a Northern California sense that water from that region has been "stolen" by Central Valley farmers and Southern California cities.

A vigorous approach to water rationing can only help Southern Californian politicians in the north, where Southern California is viewed as a profligate water waster ---- even by people who use unlimited water during droughts because their homes don't feature water meters.

Vigorous is surely an accurate term for what Villaraigosa has instituted: sprinkler use limited to twice a week, with a likely cut to once; no hosing of sidewalks or parking areas; water use in decorative fountains and ponds only if they feature a recirculating system; no washing cars with hoses without a self-closing shut-off device; no watering lawns between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., and fines for allowing excess water to flow onto sidewalks, driveways, streets or gutters. If things get worse, there would be no refilling of swimming pools and spas.

All this implies imposing a "water cop" system like that employed in the '70s, when water department or water district inspectors roved widely looking for violations.

The ultimate penalty for repeated offenders would be a water supply cutoff.

That's the immediate water future for much of California. Not a pretty sight, but it worked in the 1970s and there's no reason to believe it can't work again ---- unless the rest of the state gets the same kind of reprieve Bolinas did.

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