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For recovery, add water

FUTURE: Conference attendees say a greater emphasis needs to be placed on conserving what we have and finding new sources.

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By LOU HIRSH
The Press-Enterprise

A cool drink of water may not seem connected to economic recovery, but experts at a Thursday conference say Inland Southern California's future is at risk if leaders don't realize the two are inseparable.

Meeting at the third annual San Bernardino County Water Conference in Ontario, leaders from government, utilities and the construction industry agreed the Inland region is at the heart of a problem that is only getting worse for Western states.

Rapid housing growth has increasingly stressed water supplies that are dwindling amid the one of the most serious droughts in California history.

"We're seeing the consequences of the past 100 years on the water supply," said Brian Thomas, assistant general manager of the Metropolitan Water District, speaking Thursday to a crowd of 450 at the Ontario Convention Center.

The conference was sponsored by the Baldy View Chapter of the Building Industry Association of Southern California.

San Bernardino County Supervisor Josie Gonzales said the water crisis is a threat to sustaining a long-term economic recovery for the Inland region, since new homes and businesses will need access to water.

On the plus side, she said the national focus now being placed on environmentally friendly technology could extend to the area of water conservation, helping to create local "green" jobs.

Obtaining new water supplies to supplement already strained Southland resources -- most of it now comes from the Colorado River and the Sacramento Bay Delta in Northern California -- remains a slow and difficult process.

So, much of the focus is now on conservation. Kurt Rahn, landscape and recreation director for Professional Community Management, said the company has focused on water-efficient irrigation systems and low-flow plumbing fixtures in the housing developments it builds and operates.

However, experts said the bigger challenge is getting owners of older existing homes to conserve, especially when it comes to watering lawns.

The Inland area is increasingly seeing conservation and pricing programs like those successfully deployed in places such as Las Vegas for the past several years.

Scott Weldy, general manager of the Apple Valley Ranchos Water Company, said Apple Valley and other communities in northern San Bernardino County are getting good response from "Cash for Grass" programs, which reward homeowners who reduce turf areas and convert their lawns to require less water.

He said tiered water rates -- which rise with usage -- are also catching on.

Other experts said progress won't accelerate until national leaders give water conservation the same urgency -- and incentive funding -- of programs aimed at saving gas, oil and electricity.

"What about water?" said Tim Piasky, chief operating officer for Victory Homes. "I don't hear anything about water at the federal level."

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