California must get serious about water

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Irrigation water is cut off to protect fish. Protesting farmers fill highways with tractors. Congressmen seek modification of the Endangered Species Act. The governor declares a drought disaster. A little rain falls, and water flows again -- too little, too late to prevent crop losses.

This is a story of two places: the west side of the Central San Joaquin Valley right now and the Klamath Basin straddling the California-Oregon border in 2001. And the similarities point to a larger problem that has to be solved.

There are complicating differences, to be sure. Native Americans have rights to Klamath River water and fish. Here in the Valley, water to the west side flows through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, which provides drinking water to millions of Californians.

But western water wars are about the same thing: the failure of laws and leadership to satisfy the demands of competing interests -- agriculture, fishing, the environment and growth -- for a limited resource.

Farmers are angry, and they have a right to be. They till the ground with the expectation of water. Commercial fishermen can't feed their families if there aren't salmon to catch. Environmentalists point out that California's intricate water system will collapse without a healthy delta. Meanwhile, a stagnant economy hungers for the next housing and population boom.

There always are red herrings in these fights. In the Klamath Basin, where the floodgates of a federal irrigation project were closed for the first time in American history, water was stored to help two endangered suckers. Here the focus is on the tiny, delta smelt. But, in reality, water was held back in both cases to save wild salmon and a fishing industry that, in bountiful years, is worth billions of dollars.

So, even though the conflicts are framed as fish vs. people by farming interests, the dispute actually pits people against people in a frantic battle for water.

What are the answers?

The Endangered Species Act needs to be more flexible, allowing it to bend but not break in extreme circumstances, such as the 3-year California drought.

California also has to get serious about making its water go further through conservation and additional storage. The delta must be made healthy again. Farmers must stop putting water on low-value crops and marginal land.

If these things don't happen, we may see the demise of both agriculture and commercial fishing, the unwinding of the state's long-established water-rights doctrine and government allocation of water based on new unknown criteria.

The ideological gaps must be bridged. Leadership, compromise and science must prevail.

If not, the summers of 2001 in the Klamath Basin and 2009 in the San Joaquin Valley will become, even in wetter years, summer as usual.