

Guest Commentary: A crisis we can't afford to ignore

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The firestorm of 2007 underscored the importance of water to the San Diego area. Thankfully, local water agencies had enough water available for the firefight. But many were forced to draw heavily on water reserves, which were already low due to drought and a cutback in the state's water supply.

During this disaster, many residents were forced to boil water for several days as local water systems were treated to protect against contamination. Though safe drinking water was soon flowing again, the experience is a reminder that we can't take our water for granted.

A critical resource to California families, the economy and the environment, our statewide water system is fragile, aging and vulnerable to major damage from natural disasters such as fires, floods and earthquakes. With so much at stake, it's critical that Californians understand the serious challenges facing our statewide water system.

Despite intense media coverage and focus by the governor and legislators, the public remains largely unaware of the problems confronting California's water supply and delivery system. To address that, a statewide coalition of 450 public water agencies recently launched a public education program to raise awareness of current and future water problems.

The state's growing population puts increased pressure on our water supply. The San Diego Association of Governments projects that by 2030, the region will add another one million people. Those projections raise new challenges for a region that relies heavily on imported water.

While San Diego does an admirable job stretching its water supply through conservation and other water efficiency programs, it simply is not enough to protect the region from the state's growing water problems. In response to a request from local authorities to cut usage by 20 gallons a day, San Diegans to date have saved more than 35,000 gallons a day. While water conservation is critical, it cannot fully fend off the effects of the crisis facing our statewide water system.

One of our biggest worries is the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the single most important link in California's water supply system. But for all its importance, the Delta is in an ecological crisis that threatens our water supply and environment. Recently, a federal court ordered the state's two largest water systems to cut deliveries by one-third next year to protect a threatened fish species -- potentially the largest court-ordered reduction in California history. In recent years, one-third of San Diego County's water supply has come from the Delta. As a result, the water supply impacts of this court decision to the county will be significant, making supply shortages and mandatory water restrictions a very real possibility.

Never before has the state's water system faced the troubles it faces today. It is critical

that Californians take the combined threat of drought, climate change, supply reductions and potential natural disasters seriously. We simply cannot afford to ignore these problems -- California's present and future economy, environment and quality of life depend on a reliable water system.

-- Timothy Quinn is the executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies, a coalition of 450 public water agencies. For more information on the state's water problems, visit www.calwatercrisis.org.