

Rebalancing our state's water system

By Reps. Jim Costa
and Dennis Cardoza

During the long walks on the March for Water this past week, we could not help but reflect on how much our Valley has changed since we were young. While the San Joaquin Valley is still the world's richest agricultural region, our state's population has exploded and changed once small agricultural communities into suburbs.

These small towns now are home to world-class universities and good jobs, and are wonderful places to raise families. As these areas grew, along with the rest of the state, new demands were placed on water allocations.

Unfortunately, our state's water system, built more than 50 years ago, has not kept pace with this growth and can no longer meet our state's needs.

We also see the grim realities of this failure as we marched through these small towns. We see it on the faces of

workers. We see fertile land unplanted, and left to fallow. We see it in the long food lines due to Depression-level unemployment.

This is a crisis in the San Joaquin Valley and is both a human and economic tragedy. Our state's economic backbone, agriculture, is being threatened by the drought and if not alleviated, will impact the food security of our nation.

Fifty years ago, President Kennedy and Gov. Pat Brown had a vision to irrigate California's farmland and meet the needs of the growing population. The water system created under their leadership was sufficient to maintain farms, provide ample water to communities and the environment.

Over time, it has become evident that the Endangered Species Act and the Central Valley Improvement Act, both passed by Democratic Congresses and signed by Republican presidents, are inflexible and created dysfunctional water policies in the West. Combined,

these policies have redirected 2.4 million acre feet from our Valley.

The inflexibility of these laws, coupled with population growth and a lack of any substantial water infrastructure investment and development have upset the delicate water balance. Our charge as leaders is to repair this balance.

What isn't going to help fix these problems is turning water into a partisan issue. California has constantly been at war with itself over water; ranting and finger pointing to say "you're wrong" does nothing to help this situation.

This debate should not pit Democrats against Republicans. On the contrary, it should bring ideas from all parties on improving water management and use.

We are already working on a number of short- and long-term ideas as most Valley politicians agree, including both of us, that we need more dams, improvements in the Delta, and modifications to the Endangered Species Act.

We need to face a clear fact: California's water system is broken and incapable of sustaining our state's projected population growth, let alone providing water for our farms and sustaining the environment.

In the short term, federal regulators must use existing discretion within the law to bring as much water to the Valley as we can during the next six months. Realizing that this drought could last another year or more, we need to develop midterm strategies to meet the ongoing challenges.

This involves a series of actions, including approval of water transfers, increases in pumping during periods that will not impact fisheries and balancing impacts among agriculture, municipal and environmental water supplies. Shovel-ready infrastructure projects, such as Two-Gates and Inter-Tie, can also facilitate water transfers, conserve water, and improve water supply.

In the long term, we need to fix the

Delta and build more storage capacity. The state must take the lead in these efforts, and not hinder these projects. On the federal level, we need to make modifications to the Endangered Species Act and continue to provide additional federal funding. Clearly, if the act were successfully working, we would not have the decline in the species that we are experiencing today.

World history has shown us that when people practice poor management of natural resources, the resources die out. It is vital that our farmers have water for their crops to continue to grow a healthy and safe food supply for our nation.

Our cities need water for its residences. And yes, the environment needs water for lakes, streams and rivers. Ignoring one of these factors for any reason is not smart water policy and will hurt our state for generations to come.

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