# Clearing the Confusion on California Water

FOOD & WATER WATCH

**Agriculture — including thirsty factory farms, nuts, and alfalfa — uses 80 percent of California's managed water,[1] while oil and gas production also uses massive amounts.[2] Climate change is increasing California's water challenges and the state's ability to support these water-thirsty industries.[3]**


**SOURCE:** FWW analysis of state and federal project documents

A complex system moves water from the northern and mountainous parts of California to the southern, semi-arid region, home to industrial agriculture and large urban areas[4] (see map on page 1). Understanding how this water is managed, transported, and used is critical in plotting a sustainable water future.

California's largest water provider is the Central Valley Project, managed by the federal Bureau of Reclamation. It serves the Central Valley region, storing water across reservoirs like Lake Shasta.[5] Around 70 percent the project's deliveries go to California's thirsty agricultural industry.[6]

The State Water Project, managed by California, is the state's second largest provider. It serves the San Francisco Bay area, the San Joaquin Valley, and Southern California regions, with key reservoirs including Lake Oroville.[7] The project delivers around 70 percent of its water to urban users and 30 percent to irrigation.[8] Smaller projects like the Colorado River and the Los Angeles Aqueduct provide water to Southern California households.[9]

Droughts limit surface water supplies, increasing reliance on groundwater, which the Central Valley pumps above recharge rates.[10] Depleted groundwater causes rural wells to dry up, disproportionally impacting low-income people and communities of color.[11]

**We need to rebalance water use, especially in the face of worsening climate change. California must stop expanding water-intensive tree nut and alfalfa production, factory farms, and oil and gas production, and works toward a sustainable agriculture and renewable energy future.**

**◀ Scan here for more information!**
**Or visit fwwat.ch/californiawater**

## Endnotes


1 California Department of Water Resources. "Agricultural Water Use Efficiency." Accessed July 2025. Available at https://water.ca.gov/Programs/Water-Use-And-Efficiency/Agricultural-Water-Use-Efficiency and on file with Food & Water Watch (FWW).

2 FWW. "Big Ag, Big Oil, and the California Water Crisis." February 2023 at 1 to 2.

3 Gamelin, Brandi L. et al. "Projected U.S. drought extremes through the twenty-first century with vapor pressure deficit." Nature. Vol. 12, No. 8615. 2022 at 2, 8, and 10; Huang, Xingying and Daniel L. Swain. "Climate change is increasing the risk of a California megaflood." *Science Advances*. Vol. 8. August 2022 at 8; Hoang, Raymond et al. California Department of Water Resources. "The State Water Project Delivery Capability Report 2023." July 2024 at 7.63 and 7.67.

4 Stokstad, Eric. "Droughts exposed California's thirst for groundwater. Now, the state hopes to refill its aquifers." *Science*. April 16, 2020; U.S. Department of Interior. Bureau of Reclamation. "Reclamation: Managing Water in the West. Water Supply and Yield Study." March 2008 at iii.

5 Stern, Charles V. et al. Congressional Research Service. "Central Valley Project: Issues and Legislation." R45342. Updated May 30, 2025 at Summary, 1, 3, and 5.

*6* *Ibid*. at 5.

7 Sunding, David et al. Berkeley Research Group (BRG). Prepared for the California Department of Water Resources. "The Economy of the State Water Project: Clean, Reliable, and Affordable Water for California." December 2023 at 2, 6, 8, and 16.

*8* *Ibid*. at 5.

9 Witcher, T.R. "A Canal Runs Through It: The Central Arizona Project." *Civil Engineering*. Vol. 92, No. 2. March/April 2022 at 27; Sunding et al. (2023) at 18.

10 Liu, Pang-Wei et al. "Groundwater depletion in California's Central Valley accelerates during megadrought." *Nature Communications*. Vol. 13, No. 7825. 2022 at 1 to 2 and 4 to 5.

11 Petek, Gabriel. California Legislative Analyst's Office. "What Can We Learn From How the State Responded to the Last Major Drought?" May 2021 at 2 and 9; Bostic, Darcy et al. "Thousands of domestic and public wells face failure despite groundwater sustainability reform in California's Central Valley." *Scientific Reports*. Vol. 13, No. 14797. 2023 at 1, 3, and 6.