

Editorial: Water is too important to waste

The opinion of the RGJ's Editorial Board 10:33 a.m. PDT June 29, 2014



(Photo: Marilyn Newton/RGJ)



We live in an area that is prone to droughts.

It shouldn't be necessary to remind anyone who's live here for any length of time of that fact.

But it is.

That's because it's so easy to forget that *dry* is the natural state of the climate in these parts, thanks in large part to the shadow effect of the Carson Range to the west.

Instead, we're lured into think that *wet* is normal — by the lakes to the west (Tahoe) and north (Pyramid), by the sometimes lush landscaping, by the golf courses. This is the Truckee *Meadows*, after all, not the Truckee *Desert*.

It was just a few years ago (2011, to be exact) that we were talking about how much water we had. That winter, the snowpack was reported to be double the normal reading, and ski resorts were celebrating; Lake Tahoe was more than 200 percent of normal; and, in the Truckee Meadows, the talk was about how we were going to prevent a repeat of the New Year's Flood of 1997. Drought was the furthest thing from our minds (although officials warned us that "the drought isn't over").

How things have changed.

If anyone needed a reminder of the true nature of our environment at 4,500 feet of elevation and sitting on the western edge of the Great Basin, the summer of 2014 should be as big a reminder as we could ever ask for.

As the Gazette-Journal's Jeff DeLong reported in a series on the current three-year-old drought this past week, it is as bad today as it's been in recent memory. For the first time in about 20 years, residents will be asked later this summer to cut back on their water use by at least 10 percent to help minimize the need to dip into drought reserves.

There should be no question of compliance with the request. Water is far too precious a resource to waste, and we all benefit from conservation.

Not for growth

It's important for every to understand what *won't* happen when we conserve water. Officials won't turn around and use that water to fuel growth in the Truckee Meadows and surroundings. They can't.

Overall, Northern Nevada has been pretty smart when it comes to doling out the limited amounts of water that are available, thanks to a complex system of water rights developed by more than a century of wrangling among various Indian tribes, ranchers, water purveyors, politicians and the courts.

No one gets to use significant amounts of water, not even homeowners, without the

rights to the water (held for residential developments by the Truckee Meadows Water Authority, Washoe County or another water supplier), and new rights aren't being created. Want to build a 50-lot subdivision or a factory? Obtain the necessary water rights (including an additional percentage for drought storage) first.

Compare that to Southern Nevada, where builders build and the water district provides the water, even if it has to build a new pipeline to Lake Mead or buy water rights 300 miles away in rural Nevada.

As DeLong vividly demonstrated in his series, however, the water shortage doesn't just affect your landscaping or your ability to take a nice, long shower.

Water affects everything that we love about Northern Nevada, from recreation opportunities (boat ramps that lead not to water but to dry land in a drought, for instance), to wildlife (the lack of water could have a bigger impact on sage grouse and wild horses than any other factor), to the wildlands (fire restrictions go into effect in western Nevada on Monday), to economic development (if a project needs a lot of water, it may have to look elsewhere).

So conservation isn't simply about following seemingly arbitrary (they're not) rules about the days and times we water our lawns. It's about protecting our way of life in Northern Nevada.

Wet year or dry, water simply is too important to take lightly ... or waste