METROPOLITAN PREPARED TO MEET WATER DEMANDS IN 2014, DESPITE QUESTIONS OVER FUTURE OF REGION’S IMPORTED WATER SOURCES

With Colorado River in drought and consecutive dry years in Sierra Nevada foretelling reduced state deliveries, Southern California’s primary water import agency to call on reserves

Although Southern California’s two main sources of imported water continue to face dry conditions, the Metropolitan Water District will meet customers’ demands in 2014 by tapping its stored reserves and avoiding mandatory cutbacks, officials said today.

Metropolitan General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger joined Mark Cowin, director of California’s Department of Water Resources, to provide a sobering statewide supply update as the state heads into the new water year.

“After two consecutive dry years, the state project reservoirs that buffer California’s water supplies are getting low, leaving us no choice but to forecast reduced state supply allocations,” Cowin said. “A wet winter could increase those projections, but we need to be cautious, given last year’s early rains gave way to record-dry conditions.”

With California bracing for a potential third consecutive dry year, Kightlinger reiterated that Metropolitan has no plans to require mandatory water conservation restrictions this year or next. He said that’s because of the significant investments in storage the agency has made in recent years expressly to meet dry year demands. In addition, heightened water conservation and water-use efficiency throughout Southern California has helped significantly to preserve water supplies.

Kightlinger noted, however, that despite healthy reserves in Southern California, uncertainties remain regarding the region’s supplies from both Northern California and the drought-plagued Colorado River, the district’s two imported water sources.

In particular, he said, the decline of reliability in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta because of its continued environmental degradation and associated pumping restrictions threatens Metropolitan’s supplies from the State Water Project. The SWP provides about a third of the Southland’s water.
Meanwhile, the state is dealing with back-to-back dry years, Cowin said. After a wet November and December in the Sierra Nevada last year, the rain and snow stopped. January through June was the driest on record, and the state responded by reducing its SWP allocation to 35 percent.

Cowin said current low storage levels in the SWP’s Lake Oroville increases the likelihood DWR’s initial 2014 state allocation will be very low when announced in December. Lake Oroville currently has nearly 350,000 acre feet less in storage than this time last year.

“If this winter does not deliver abundant rain and snow, shortages in some regions of the state are likely next year,” Cowin said. “We need Southern Californians to keep up their water conservation that sets a good example for all of the state.”

Kightlinger said it’s important that water supply reliability be returned to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta because pumping restrictions to protect endangered fish are impairing Metropolitan’s ability to capture adequate supplies even in wet years.

“Southern California’s immediate supply outlook is stable, but the long-term picture is less certain, particularly in Northern California because of the Delta’s decline,” Kightlinger said, noting that pumping restrictions cost Metropolitan nearly 300,000 acre-feet of water in 2013—about the amount used by 600,000 households in and around their homes in a year.

Both Kightlinger and Cowin said the success of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, which aims to stabilize the Delta ecosystem and water deliveries, is critical to ensuring SWP supply reliability.

“We simply have to seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to reverse the trends in the Delta that are not good for people or fish,” Cowin said.

In the Colorado River Basin, a years-long drought continues to negatively impact storage levels on the river’s two main reservoirs. Both Lake Powell and Lake Mead are less than half full. Continued dry conditions on the Colorado River could trigger supply restrictions in the years ahead, Kightlinger said.

Even with the Southland’s healthy water reserves, Kightlinger said it’s important that the region continue to use water wisely and efficiently and to develop more local resources. He mentioned that last month Metropolitan’s Board of Directors expanded the list of water-saving devices available to Southland consumers and businesses for rebates with an eye on meeting the statewide goal of lowering residential per-capita water use 20 percent by the year 2020.

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*The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California is a cooperative of 26 cities and water agencies serving 19 million people in six counties. The district imports water from the Colorado River and Northern California to supplement local supplies, and helps its members to develop increased water conservation, recycling, storage and other resource-management programs.*