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Officials: Revise water rules

State and local water rules need revising in order to deal with Nevada's water scarcity.

That was the consensus of water authorities and providers who spoke on a panel Tuesday during the second day of the Governor's Drought Summit. The three-day summit was convened by Gov. Brian Sandoval to examine and find ways to cope with the state's ongoing drought.

Speaking only of the Colorado River, which supplies 90 percent of Las Vegas' water, John Entsminger, general manager, Southern Nevada Water Authority, said the framework of prior appropriation needs to be reconsidered.

"Water rights management has to evolve from strict priority of winners and losers to more of a shared risk," he said.

Bruce Scott, chairman of the state Board for Financing Water Projects, agreed, saying the governor should make a push to change water law in the next legislative session in the same way his administration championed education in the last session.

"Water needs to be considered as a resource not as a political pawn," said Scott.

Mark Foree, general manager, Truckee Meadows Water won water reuse is a barrier to conservation.

"We do need state regulations on more use of treated wastewater," he said.

Foree also said TMWA was working with local agencies in the Truckee Meadows to change city landscape ordinances that prevent more water-efficient landscaping.

Wendy Barnett, president, Utilities Inc., which operates private utilities in Elko, Nye and Washoe counties, said the state engineer's office needs more tools to manage water.

Utilities Inc. operations rely solely on groundwater, including in Pahrump, one of the most severely stressed basins in the state.

“We don’t want to make it so people can speculate,” she said.

“We need to think it through very carefully how to change the tools, but the tools do need to be changed.”

Barnett said a useful, existing mechanism for purveyors is tiered or block rates in which the per-unit rate for water goes up as the amount consumed increases, discouraging overconsumption.

“Tiered rates are probably the most effective conservation tool,” Barnett said. “In Elko, they used 12 times more water in the summer. With tiered rates that dropped to five times more.”

SNWA has long had conservation programs, including a successful turf buyback program and rebates for low-flow toilets and shower heads, resulting in the last 12 years of a 43 percent drop in gallons per capita daily while Las Vegas’ population grew 25 percent, said Entsminger.

TMWA, too, has managed to cut production — by 12.5 percent in the last decade or so — while the population grew.

But Foree attributed much of that drop to the installation of water meters. He said TMWA’s last flat rate customers are being converted to meters next week.

TMWA earlier this year asked customers to cut back 10 percent, resulting in an overall 12 percent drop in water consumption throughout the summer, said Foree.

That saved about 5,000 acre feet, allowing the water authority to leave all water in Independence Lake, one of several reservoirs.

The Truckee River Operating Agreement, between TMWA, Nevada, California and the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, will double TMWA’s upstream storage.

TROA is expected to go into effect this month or next, said Foree.

Both TMWA and SNWA plan for extended droughts and only under the worst case scenarios would need to find alternative water supplies two or three decades out.

That includes water importation projects such as the Fish Springs project TMWA is already undertaking to serve the North Valleys as well as SNWA’s plan to build a pipeline to take water from valleys in Lincoln and White Pine counties, a project which is now being litigated in the courts.

“There are 117 interbasin transfers right now, it’s nothing new.” Entsminger said.

“When you live in the driest state in the union you don’t want to take any options off the table.”

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