

Center for American Progress



Lessons on Climate Change and Poverty From the California Drought

By Wendy Ortiz August 2015

Introduction and summary

The entire state of California is experiencing its worst drought in 1,200 years.¹ Reservoirs, underground aquifers, and snowpacks are at all-time lows, forcing the state government to make unprecedented decisions about the allocation and conservation of the state's water resources. For example, the total amount of water stored in the Sacramento and San Joaquin river basins was 34 million acre-feet below normal in 2014.² Because the California drought threatens the capacity of the nation's leading agricultural producer, it may have disastrous consequences for everyone living in the United States. Human-driven climate change is altering the natural variability of the climate, and droughts like this one are likely to continue to occur.³

The effects of climate-fueled extreme weather events such as the current California drought, however, are not felt equally. Rather, they exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequalities. In California, communities of color and low-income people living in tribal, rural, and farming communities have been carrying a disproportionate share of the drought's burden since it began in 2012.

The enduring effects of racial segregation and the underinvestment in low-income communities—in California and elsewhere—have placed people of color and low-income people in environments that threaten their physical and emotional health. Low-income communities and communities of color are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change due to poor-quality housing and infrastructure,⁴ proximity to environmental hazards,⁵ and economic instability.⁶ Because these communities have been institutionally excluded from accruing wealth and assets⁷—which are prominent indicators of a family's ability to prepare for unexpected shocks—they are less able to survive and recover from disastrous events.

Recognizing the unequal impacts that the drought has had on low-income people living in tribal, rural, and farming communities, California Gov. Jerry Brown (D) approved a \$1 billion drought relief package for small and rural communities.⁸

The drought relief package, which the legislature passed on March 19, 2015, will provide direct relief to agricultural workers and communities who have been most affected by the California drought. The bill also provides “an additional \$17 million for emergency food aid, \$4.4 million for disaster recovery support, and \$24 million for emergency drinking water in small and disadvantaged communities impacted by the drought.”⁹

On April 1, 2015, Gov. Brown signed an executive order instituting the first obligatory water conservation plan in the state. The order imposes a 25 percent reduction in urban water usage by water suppliers to all California cities and towns through February 28, 2016; provides a statewide rebate program to replace appliances that are water inefficient; requires replacement of 50 million square feet of lawns with drought resistant landscapes; restructures water fees and penalties; and regulates underground water use.¹⁰ As of April 2015, Californians in cities and towns had “increased their water conservation to 13.5 percent.”¹¹

While the drought relief package for small and rural communities is an important step toward addressing the myriad issues that affect access to clean and affordable water, policymakers must do more to protect the livelihoods of low-income communities and communities of color from the direct and indirect consequences of the drought. Agricultural communities throughout the state are suffering from high rates of unemployment, limited and costly access to safe and affordable water, food insecurity, and health issues related to toxic underground water. California A.B. 685, The Human Right to Water Bill—passed on September 25, 2012—made safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water a fundamental human right.¹² This drought poses a significant challenge to that responsibility and commitment.

California’s drought should also serve as a wakeup call for other U.S. states that are at risk for a severe drought, especially in the context of existing economic inequities among residents. This report explores the intersection of climate change and inequality in the context of the California drought, highlighting the unique and disproportionate challenges faced by California’s low-income and farming communities. Finally, the report offers recommendations for better addressing these disparities with urgency in order to move toward justice.

The recommendations include:

- Mandating that the agricultural sector be included in statewide greenhouse gas, or GHG, reduction standards
- Developing water reduction standards for riparian water rights holders
- Lifting the 15-service-connection minimum for water systems to receive financial support in order to help residents who rely on small, private wells
- Supporting and incentivizing climate resilient resource planning and management
- Focusing on green water-infrastructure projects
- Making the lives of the people most affected by the drought central to federal, state, and local decision-making processes regarding the state's management of water resources

With a drought-produced deficit of 11 trillion gallons of water, continuous high temperatures, and no relief in sight, the state of California should focus on short- and long-term resolutions that center around the well-being of historically divested communities.¹³ Implementing the recommendations outlined in this report would be an important step in that direction.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

