

What If?

What If We Saw the Drought as an Opportunity?

By Jim Morgan

On an ordinary day, most of us turn on the faucet without thinking about where our water comes from. However, times of crisis remind us how dependent we are on large, fragile systems that are rarely on our collective radar.

California's drought is a great example. When snowpack levels make headlines and experts warn that water supplies are at unprecedented lows, we start to think differently about water.

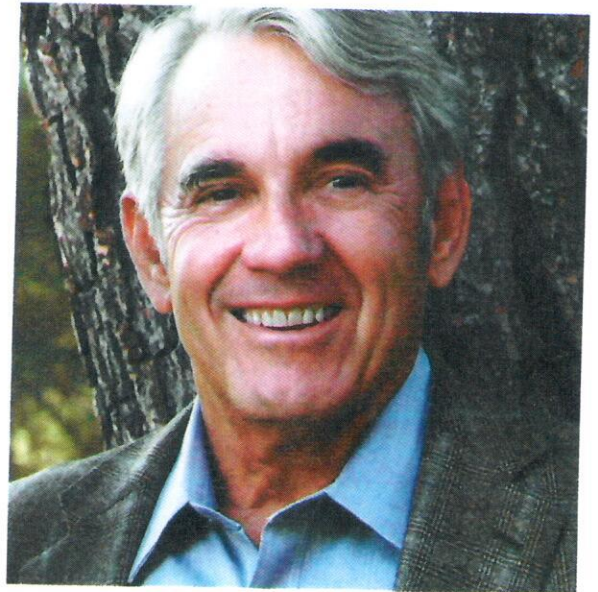
Silicon Valley, let's take this opportunity to lead innovative thinking about water management. Seeing water as a system — literally “thinking upstream” and focusing on the health of our water at its source — will reframe our actions toward long-term solutions. When we know that 60 percent of the state's water originates in the northern Sierra, where watersheds are at risk, we start to understand that taking shorter showers is simply not enough. What if we concentrated on larger solutions that will ensure the longevity of our entire water system?

Happily, some big thinkers are already on the job. Some of the brightest minds at California's research universities and nonprofits are applying cutting-edge science to protect precious natural resources in the northern Sierra. Their research

indicates that mountain meadow restoration provides a host of ecological benefits, including storing water for release later in the summer when it is most valuable for people and nature. Similarly, careful management of forest canopies prevents evaporation and keeps the snowpack on the ground longer. This also makes water downstream available throughout the year.

Bold coalitions such as the Northern Sierra Partnership (NSP) have formed to drive large-scale land conservation projects that no single group could attempt alone. They're making sure vital land and waters are restored and enhanced for future generations. In addition to purchasing land, the NSP and others are partnering with ranchers and landowners to set up conservation easements on private property. Doing so allows state-of-the-art conservation practices to contribute to entire ecosystems.

Natural systems are connected, so these investments in conservation also mitigate devastating forest fires and mudslides. In turn, that saves additional precious water resources. Together, water and forest management preserves private, state and federal assets. We see the resource flywheel begin to spin in a direction of abundance rather than scarcity.



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Californians have inherited a land doubly rich in beauty and in natural resources. This affords us a high quality of life. Rather than taking a laissez-faire attitude toward this bounty, let's be mindful that these resources need to be managed. Ensuring the protection of California's water is not a job for one person or one community, but for every person in every community. We should all see ourselves as stewards of our state's land and resources.

Let's get creative. Let's insist on win-win solutions that safeguard whole ecosystems as well as human life. Let's use our philanthropic dollars, our votes and our collective will to support a long-term, whole-system approach to essential resources — like water — that sustain us all.

SVCF donor Jim Morgan is the chairman of the Northern Sierra Partnership's Governing Council and chairman emeritus of Applied Materials.

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