


Commentary

Trump doesn't understand California's complex water network. But that's not the point

 by Robert Greene
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A firefighter tries to switch off a fire hydrant in front of a home along Pacific Coast Highway in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood of Los Angeles on Jan. 12, 2025. Photo by Apu Gomes, Getty Images

Does Donald Trump truly believe the nonsense he spouts about California water — the mythical [“valve” connecting the state to Canada](#), or the imagined “half-pipe” that stands ready to soak the Los Angeles area?

Does he honestly believe that “forest management” practices supposedly used in [wet and chilly Finland](#) or alpine Austria would have prevented the burning of California coastal sage scrub and the destruction of Altadena and Pacific Palisades?

Trump is both a master of strategic misdirection and a man who tends to believe what he finds advantageous to believe, facts notwithstanding. Either way, [Trumpologists](#) —

those who specialize in deciphering him — generally advise examining his actions rather than his words.

Trump's actions [took the form of a new executive order](#) that crystalized his alliance with large and thirsty San Joaquin Valley agricultural interests and his contempt for the state's fishing industry, inland Delta cities, Indigenous tribes and natural resources. The order calls for overriding state environmental laws and reinterpreting federal laws like the Endangered Species Act that stand in the way of water transfers in times of drought to growers of crops like almonds and alfalfa.

To his credit, it includes support for displaced families in Southern California and North Carolina. But none of the clauses dealing with water have even the slightest bearing on the horrid fires, despite his repeated claims during [his brief Los Angeles visit](#) that the devastation was a result of bad water policy.

It's the orders — not his words — that are most consequential and that pose serious danger to California.



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Yet Trump's wild verbal justifications for them are also worth examining, for two reasons. First, he's the president, and many Americans will accept his claims as true when they are not. That's a problem, because California does have serious water issues, including a decade-long drought interrupted by historic and deadly flooding. And we're on the verge of driving iconic species like migratory Chinook salmon into extinction and choking Stockton and other Delta cities with stagnant, saline, toxic water as snowmelt that historically runs through and replenishes their region is diverted for other uses.

Misidentifying the problem is like arresting the wrong person for serial murder or administering the wrong medication to treat a contagious disease. It provides the illusion that problems are being solved when, in fact, they are festering.

Trump's statements also provide valuable clues to the way he thinks.

Shape of the West

So let's consider the nonexistent valve, which he discussed during his campaign, and the needlessly empty half-pipe, a newer imponderable that he brought up at the [Friday LA roundtable](#) before issuing his order. In Trump's view, this imagined infrastructure lets "hundreds of millions of gallons of water flow down into Southern California" from the north, if only we'd let it.

How far north? Trump earlier spoke of Northern California, but by Friday he said the source was “the Pacific Northwest.” By the end of the day he claimed the water flowed down — “naturally” — from Canada.

It flows so steadily from north to south, he said — and has been doing so for millions of years — that we don’t even need reservoirs. If only we would turn the spigot, it would just keep coming.

That may be an almost accurate description of other river systems, like the Mississippi, which flows south from Minnesota near the Canadian border to the [Gulf of Mexico](#) (which Trump is renaming the “Gulf of America”).



Farmland is irrigated near Mendota in the San Joaquin Valley on March 3, 2023. Photo by Larry Valenzuela, CalMatters/CatchLight Local

But the West isn’t shaped like the central U.S., which slopes gently southward. In California, the low point is not at the bottom but in the middle — the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. Inland rivers north of there flow south, but those to the south flow north. They don’t cross the Tehachapis, which separate Southern California from the rest of the state.

The State Water Project, built in the 1960s, uses more electrical power than any other single project in the state to [pump Northern California water south](#) over the mountains. The transfer is anything but natural and requires dams to hold Sierra snowmelt and aqueducts to bring it to places it otherwise could never go.

Even if all that water did flow to Southern California, there would be nowhere to put it, at least not right now. The region currently has more water in storage than at any time in human history.

Does Trump believe that a [far-fetched proposal](#) by the late engineer Ralph Parsons to drain western Canada for the benefit of the western U.S. was actually built? Or the late Los Angeles County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn's [plan to tap the Columbia River](#), or actor William Shatner's more recent but equally impractical [pipeline from the same place](#)?

They weren't built. They won't be.

Far more likely is a [controversial tunnel](#) to bring Sacramento River around, rather than through, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and to the California aqueduct. But after decades of debate, that comparatively small project hasn't been built either, at least not yet.

Forest management in a warmer planet

What about forest raking to prevent wildfire?

Since his first term, Trump has scolded California for not doing what he said the [president of Finland once told him](#) his country does (although the Finnish leader recalled no such conversation): raking the forest floor to keep things safe and tidy.

Because of this practice, Trump said, Finland never had wildfires.

Set aside for a moment the basic fact that the moist climate in Finland ([and Austria](#), which Trump also touted as fire-free) is far different from arid Southern California, and that conifers suck up water while chaparral and coastal scrub is dry and brittle much of the year.

Soon after Trump left office in 2021, [Finland suffered its worst forest fires](#) in a half century, forest "raking" notwithstanding. [Austria had its worst fires ever](#). From South Africa to Patagonia to India, to the Camp fire that destroyed the California town of Paradise, the world caught fire in 2021, not because of poor forest management but because of a changing climate that brought extended drought and previously unimaginable heatwaves.

But Trump is sticking as close to his forest-raking story as he is to the giant valve and the half-pipe from Canada, even as he orders changes that would siphon more water away from Stockton, small Delta farms and the rivers that carry migrating salmon and instead deliver it to large almond and alfalfa growers.

But not to Southern California faucets or fire hydrants.

Ignorance is expensive. It can make us spend resources on the wrong things, for example watering the chaparral to keep tumbleweeds green — another Trump suggestion — instead of restoring floodplains to allow water to percolate into the soil and replenish aquifers.

And it is dangerous. Trump on Friday urged Los Angeles leaders to allow people to immediately sift through the ruins of their burned-down Pacific Palisades homes. We will, city officials said, as soon as we deal with the toxic waste. Trump insisted there was no such thing.

Meanwhile, he has [scrapped proposed limits](#) on releasing so-called “forever chemicals” into the environment, so that all clean, fresh drinking water that flows down from the north will continue to carry poison to the almond orchards, the migrating salmon and us.



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