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## Don't divert from Tuolumne River to water Bay Area lawns

By Peter Drekmeier

The recently announced California drought poses not only challenges, but also opportunities. Through water conservation and recycling, we can do more than simply stretch a limited natural resource. We also can help protect our rivers and streams that provide wildlife habitat, recreation and an unsurpassed natural beauty that makes California such a special place to live.

One such river is the Tuolumne, which originates high in the mountains of Yosemite National Park. Designated a "wild and scenic river" in 1984, the Tuolumne offers unparalleled outdoor recreation opportunities, hosting thousands of hikers, whitewater boaters, anglers and family campers each year.

Although the river's natural flow is impeded by two major dams, one of which famously inundates the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite, it continues to support a remarkable and diverse biological community, including steelhead trout and Chinook salmon. As the largest tributary of the San Joaquin River, it provides fresh water flows that are critical to the health of that river and the San Francisco Bay and delta.

Currently, more than 59 percent of the Tuolumne is diverted for urban and agricultural uses. As a result, the salmon population has crashed from 18,000 in 2000 to just over 200 last year.

Despite this dramatic decline, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is proposing to divert up to 25 million more gallons of water per day from the Tuolumne in order to meet projected future demands. All of this increase would go to serve the PUC's 1.7 million customers in Santa Clara, San Mateo and Alameda counties, and most of it would be for outdoor use.

Increasing diversions from the Tuolumne would not only harm the environment, it also would threaten to delay critical seismic upgrades to the Hetch Hetchy water system. The two issues have been combined in a "program environmental impact report," and while the upgrades enjoy nearly universal support, the proposal to divert more water would probably face expensive and time-consuming lawsuits.

Diverting more water from the Tuolumne is unnecessary. Through water conservation and recycling, we could meet our future needs without causing further harm to this magnificent natural resource that provides sustenance for much of the Bay Area.

Other communities have managed to grow without increasing water consumption. For example, Seattle has reduced its water use by 15 percent from 1985 while serving 20 percent more people.

Perhaps the best way to build momentum for conservation and recycling is through a cap-and-trade market system, much like those proposed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Under such a system, each of the PUC's 27 wholesale customers would be granted a per capita water allocation based on the current amount of water diverted from the Tuolumne divided by the overall population of the PUC service area. Utilities using more than their share would have to purchase credits from those using less than their entitlement.

Communities such as Los Altos Hills, which has the highest per capita water use in the region, could continue to water their lawns as long as they paid others to conserve or use recycled water. This would drive the market for innovative new technologies and practices.

With California's population expected to grow from 38 million to 60 million by 2050, and with the Sierra snowpack decreasing due to climate change, now is the time to take action. We must do everything possible to sustain our resource base.

For more information on the Tuolumne River, please visit [www.tuolumne.org](http://www.tuolumne.org).

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