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Editorial: San Francisco and its PUC need to innovate on water use

Chronicle Editorial Board

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California farmers rally at the Capitol to protest a proposal by state water officials to increase water flows for the lower San Joaquin River to protect fish, at the Capitol, Monday, Aug. 20, 2018, in Sacramento, Calif. The State Water Resources Control Board is holding hearings this week concerning a plan to allow more water to flow freely down the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta from February to June, meaning less water

San Francisco has always been on the periphery of California's water wars — until last week. That's when San Francisco Supervisor Aaron Peskin introduced with three co-sponsors a resolution to the Board of Supervisors that San Francisco should help maintain river flows in the San Joaquin by reducing its take from the Tuolumne, a tributary.

Meanwhile, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission is working all the angles in Sacramento and with the Trump administration to keep every drop of Tuolumne River water to which it believes it is legally entitled.

It's too easy to make this a political question of "does San Francisco side with Trump or not?" This is a policy question that will determine life in California long after Trump is gone. Do Californians carve out a share of water for the environment — in good water years and drought years — or do we battle over every drop for human use while living in a dust bowl? San Francisco needs to reduce its draw from the Tuolumne and develop other water sources and reuses.

At stake is nothing less than the desirability of our state, as well as the survival of the West Coast's iconic salmon fishery and the fishing industry that depends on it.

In a proposal nearly 10 years in the making, the State Water Resources Control Board has asked that the water agencies that draw water from the San Joaquin River and its tributaries — like San Francisco — reduce their take during certain times of the year to ensure "unimpaired flows" of between 30 and 50 percent. This keeps cool water in the river for spawning fish and needed freshwater flows in the estuary for a healthy San Francisco Bay and delta.

The need is great: Drive along the San Joaquin River and you will see a wide riverbed with a tiny trickle of water, the result of many, many diversions to farms and cities. Lack of adequate river flows have California's salmon fisheries on the brink of extinction.

The state water board will vote on the proposal Nov. 7 and then move on to implementation, where the details of whatever plan is adopted will be worked out. Later in November, the board will take on the next big planning effort: a similar proposal for the state's largest river, the Sacramento.

San Francisco, relying on its Hetch Hetchy pipeline and a long relationship with the Modesto and Turlock irrigation districts, has fallen behind other counties and agencies on water innovation.

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Today, we trail Orange County, San Diego County, even the East Bay Municipal Utility District, in

working out cooperative agreements and adopting technologies that make efficient, responsible use of scarce water. Demand for water already is great and will only climb as the climate warms and our state's population grows.

We are leaders of innovation in information technology, biotechnology and soon automotive technology. San Francisco — both its governing board and its water commission — needs to apply our innovation know-how to water. Now.

This commentary is from The Chronicle's editorial board. We invite you to express your views in a letter to the editor. Please submit your letter via our online form: [SFChronicle.com/letters](https://www.sfchronicle.com/letters).

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