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Viewpoints: Snowpack shows vulnerability of water supply

By [Mike Chrisman](#)

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Last year, in late March, Gov. Jerry Brown declared an end to California's three-year drought. The mountain snowpack was at 165 percent of normal, and major reservoirs in the state and federal water systems all had more water in them than usual.

This year, it's a different story. Sierra snow depths are well below average, with [water content](#) in the Sierra snowpack measured at only 40 percent of normal. This contrast is a sobering illustration of the state's unpredictable [water supply](#) and should be a wake-up call to action. If we are to ensure that there is enough water to meet the state's ever-increasing needs, we must first address the challenges facing the [Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta](#).

The Delta is the heart of California's water system, and I've experienced its decline directly; first as a fourth-generation San Joaquin Valley rancher, then serving as secretary of California's Natural Resources Agency and now as a board director of the Delta Vision Foundation.

Over the years, I have heard just about every argument, from every side, about how the Delta should be managed to restore its damaged ecosystem and provide a reliable water supply for the state. Rarely have I seen the various combatants in California's "water wars" agree on anything. But over the past year, in

roundtable discussions with experts at the top level of engagement on water issues in California, I'm hearing less acrimony and more consensus. Sponsored by the Delta Vision Foundation, these discussions are frank, civil and solution-oriented. Importantly, almost everyone agrees that we've spent far too much time talking about solutions and not enough energy implementing them.

It is time to make tough choices and act on them.

The Delta is in crisis, both as a valuable ecosystem and essential water supply. Its levees are crumbling, putting thousands of people at risk for flooding and water supply disruption. The entire Delta ecosystem remains at critical risk of failure. And yet we are no closer to improving the long-term reliability of [water supplies](#) from the Delta, on which much of California depends.

The institutional framework is in place to solve these thus-far intractable issues. The 2008 Delta Vision Strategic Plan was developed by the governor's appointed Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force, with representation from a variety of water, environmental, business and agriculture experts. The plan's recommendations hinge on the comprehensive set of integrated and linked actions to achieve the two equal goals of restoring the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta ecosystem and ensuring a reliable water supply for California.

Next month, the Delta Vision Foundation's third annual report card will be released, grading the governor's administration, the Legislature and state and federal agencies on their progress and effectiveness in advancing the strategic plan's recommendations for the Delta. The report card covers a comprehensive range of issues along with water supply reliability, including ecosystem [restoration](#) and recovery; Delta vitality and security; and cooperation among the state, federal agencies and stakeholders.

These components all carry equal weight and must be looked at as a whole. History has taught us that the Delta's problems cannot be addressed by any single action – over 30 years of political deadlock has shown that we need to take an inclusive approach. But it takes time to bring everyone to the table, and given the clear evidence that our water supply is episodic and changeable, time is a luxury we cannot afford.

It is urgent that implementation of the strategic plan's recommendations moves forward now. The upcoming report card will clearly define the state's progress on fixing the Delta, as well as what remains to be done. Although last year's grades were disappointing, perhaps this year's paltry snowpack – along with the report card's frank evaluation – will move our leaders to action.

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