

## Rachel Hutchinson, Melinda Booth: Water conservation makes sense

Other Voices

Rachel Hutchinson & Melinda Booth

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Water conservation is a way of life in California. Our climate is characterized by wet winters followed by hot, dry summers. It follows that late into the summer, water is scarce except for in the wettest years.

Below "normal" water years are common, occurring in 60 out the last 110 years, or 55 percent of the time, according to the California Department of Water Resources.

Droughts are expensive. Farmers lose crops and livestock, homeowners must drill new wells and abandon their lawns. In the most recent drought, over 129 million trees died in the Sierra Nevada and billions have already been spent removing those trees and combating wildfire. NID loses money, too.

NID claimed in a recent article that water conservation is expensive for them; they lost just over \$3 million to water conservation in 2015. If NID customers would have used more water, they could have made more money. But where would that water have come from and at what cost?

“If saving water means hurting NID’s bottom line, then perhaps it’s time to rethink how we manage water.”

If NID's 5,400 raw water customers had saved an additional 3 acre-feet per user (about 10 percent of estimated water usage) in 2015, they would have saved NID \$650,000 in water

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purchases. Treated water customers were able to save an astounding 38 percent. If saving water means hurting NID's bottom line, then perhaps it's time to rethink how we manage water.

If each customer had conserved just a little more, sharing the responsibility, NID customers would have been protected from the possibility of losing out on water deliveries without a major cost to our local water agency.

NID is asking the community to support the construction of a new dam on the Bear River to solve this "water conservation" issue. In a changing climate, depending on the ample supply of a highly variable resource like water is a risky bet. Moreover, who pays for the dam? Who will NID and their customers owe, with estimates in the \$500 million to \$1 billion range?

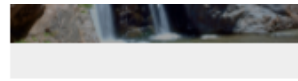
The article NID commissioned Trina Kleist to write, "Conservation, drought cost NID \$3.8M," (The Union, Feb. 4) can easily lead readers to infer that with a new dam, NID users won't need to conserve and NID won't lose money. This is a deeply troubling position for a public agency to take, especially one charged with stewarding water.

Let's be clear about water for our communities — water use is more expensive than water conservation. In fact, NID spent \$1.8 million to plan Centennial Dam in 2015 and nearly \$12 million total as of October 2017. What if that money had been invested in conservation, technology and education?

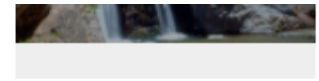
Water is the most precious resource in California and the entire western United States. Our livelihood depends on a reservoir system that relies on winter snowpack to feed our farms and families during our dry summers. In exchange for water security we dammed our wild rivers and the species that thrived there. They paid with their lives rather than dollars. Our rivers are diverse and dynamic landscapes that offer us opportunities to recreate and rejuvenate. Is it reasonable to lose another stretch of river just because NID loses profit when customers step up and conserve?

With the proposed Centennial Dam, NID is trying to solve future water problems with old technology.

If everyone conserves and integrates new technology, we can work on maintaining what is left of our rivers as our population grows. We will need to do more than retrofit and replace our leaky toilets and washing machines. We will need to work together, with NID, on finding long-term solutions that draw on more sustainable, flexible technology rather than pouring a concrete wall into a river. We may even have to change the type of crops we farm; that is the future we are facing, pretending otherwise is perilous.



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With warming and a dwindling snowpack, we must face the facts: business as usual is not going to cut it.

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