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**FM3**

*Public Opinion Research  
& Strategy*

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: David Metz, Curtis Below & Miranda Everitt  
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RE: Key Findings from a Recent Survey of California Voters on Water Issues

DATE: July 29, 2015

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Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) recently completed a telephone survey of 1,000 California voters to assess opinions of the ongoing drought and potential policy responses.<sup>1</sup> The study shows that public concern about California's drought is intense, and voters believe the Governor and the Legislature should be doing more to prepare the state for future droughts as well as responding to the current one. **California voters broadly support major and permanent changes in how California manages its water** and are willing to pay to invest in better infrastructure to respond to what they see as a serious, long-term water shortage.

Among the key specific findings of the survey:

- **Public concern about the drought is extremely high.** Voters were asked to rate how personally concerned they are about the drought in California on a scale from zero to 100, where zero means "not concerned at all" and 100 means "extremely concerned." Half (50%) gave a rating of 90 or higher – and 23 percent gave the highest rating possible, 100. This high level of concern cut across key subgroups as well (see **Figure 1** on the following page):
  - ✓ In the Central Valley, the share rating the seriousness of the drought at 100 was even higher, at 32 percent.
  - ✓ Latino voters' mean score was 81.6 out of 100 – higher than white voters' score (79.8 out of 100).

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**FIGURE 1**  
**Level of Drought Concern, by Region and Ethnicity**  
*(On a Scale from 0 to 100)*

Ethnicity	Mean Score
African-American	86.2
Asian	82.4
Latino	81.6
White	79.3
Region	
Central Valley	84.0
Bay Area	83.5
Los Angeles County	80.1
Sacramento/Northern California	79.8
Counties Surrounding LA	76.5
San Diego	74.8

- **Voters were presented with a list of problems facing the state, and the three related to the drought were rated as extremely or very serious by at least four in five voters.** *Current drought conditions in California* are considered “extremely serious” by 56 percent of voters (and at least “very serious” by 86 percent). This level of concern ranks the drought well above every major issue facing the state. And while the breadth of concern about the drought has held steady since last year, the intensity of concern has grown. The proportion rating the drought an “extremely serious” problem has shot up by double-digits since last summer, from 35 percent to 56 percent.
- **Overwhelming majorities see the drought’s effect on both the environment and agriculture as very serious problems.** Voters express equal concern about various impacts of the drought. While *the impact of the drought on California’s environment* is an “extremely” or “very serious” problem to 85 percent of California voters, 81 percent say the same for *the impact of the drought on agriculture*.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Perception of Seriousness of Drought for Environment and Agriculture, by Region**  
*(% Rating Each an “Extremely/Very Serious Problem”)*

Region	Impact on Environment	Impact on Agriculture
Central Valley	87%	89%
Bay Area	85%	79%
Los Angeles County	84%	84%
Sacramento/Northern California	89%	83%
Counties Surrounding LA	85%	75%
San Diego	72%	84%

- **Access to safe drinking water concerns Californians in every region and political party.** Among a list of problems about California water supplies, *nearly one million Californians lack access to safe drinking water* yielded significant concern across political party and region (**Figure 3**).

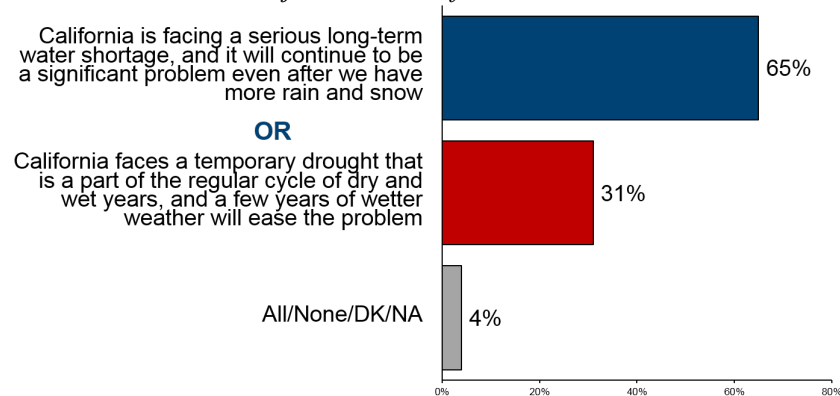
**FIGURE 3**  
**Concern about Lack of Safe Drinking Water, by Party and Region**

Party Registration	Extremely/Very Concerned
Democratic	83%
Independent	72%
Republican	61%
Region	
Los Angeles County	80%
Central Valley	79%
San Diego	75%
Bay Area	71%
Sacramento/Northern California	69%
Counties Surrounding LA	67%

- **Voters recognize the drought as a serious, long-term water shortage – not part of a regular climate cycle.** After hearing a set of paired statements about the drought shown in **Figure 4**, more than twice as many voters said they believe that California faces permanent constraints on the availability of water (65%) as believe that the drought will ease after a few years of rain (31%). Voters in Los Angeles County (70 percent), the Central Valley (68 percent) and the Bay Area (73 percent) are more likely than those in other regions to feel that the drought is a lasting problem.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Voters’ Beliefs about the Persistence of This Drought**

*Now I am going to read you several pairs of statements about water supplies in California. After you hear each pair, please tell me which statement comes closest to your opinion. Remember, choose just one even if it’s hard to decide.*



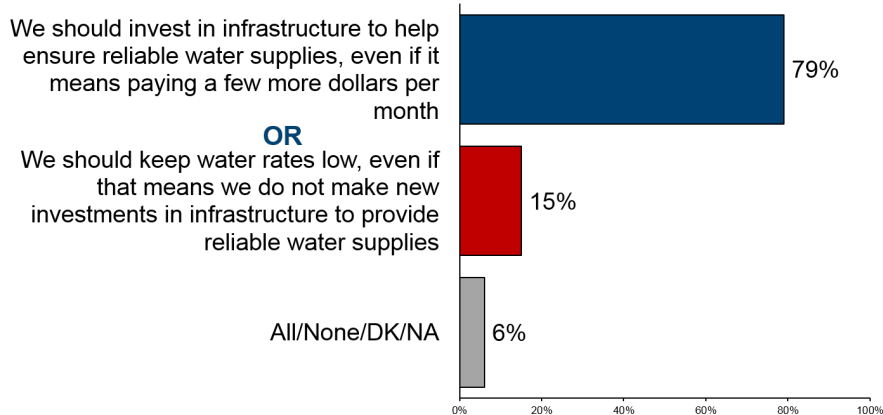
- Voters see inefficiency and lack of investment in infrastructure as the major causes of the current drought, much more so than environmental regulations.** Voters were offered three potential causes of the current drought and were asked to choose which was the most important. More than one-third (37%) chose lack of investment in infrastructure, while another third (35%) selected wasteful use. Only about one in ten (11%) chose environmental regulations as the most important cause of the drought. **Figure 5** details the results by region and party registration.

**FIGURE 5**  
**Most Important Cause of Drought, by Region and Party Registration**  
*Which of the following do you think is the most important cause of the drought?*

Region	% First Choice		
	Lack of Infrastructure	Inefficient Use	Environmental Regulations
Los Angeles	38%	38%	9%
Counties Surrounding Los Angeles	36%	36%	11%
Bay Area	31%	43%	10%
San Diego	46%	29%	13%
Sacramento and Northern California	33%	29%	13%
Central Valley	42%	23%	15%
<b>Party Registration</b>			
Democratic	34%	39%	9%
Independent	34%	41%	11%
Republican	42%	25%	14%

- California voters are willing to invest in water infrastructure even at the cost of higher water bills.** When asked to choose between the statements in **Figure 6**, nearly four in five (79%) voters said they prefer investment in infrastructure over low water rates.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Voters’ Preferences in a Water Rate-Infrastructure Trade-Off**

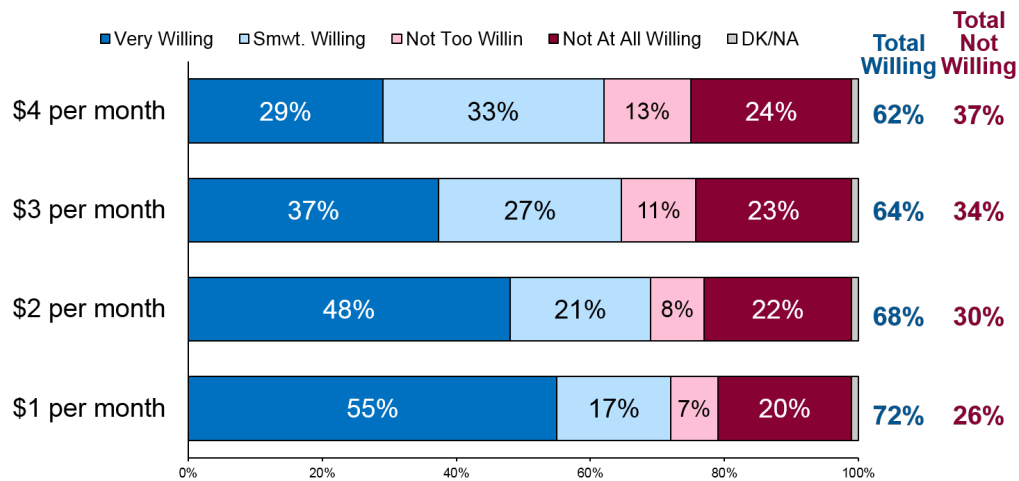


- **Over 60 percent support a water fee of up to \$4 per month; seven in ten (72%) support \$1 per month.** Before a specific amount is mentioned, a majority of voters (55%) say they are willing to pay a fee on their monthly water bill “to address the impacts of droughts and improve local, regional and state water supply and water quality.” Surprisingly, even greater shares say they are willing when specific dollar amounts are named (**Figure 7** on the following page). More than three in five (62%) are willing to pay an extra \$4 per month, and 72 percent are willing to add \$1 per month to their water bill to address the drought. A \$2 monthly fee per household would raise more than \$300 million in a year.

**FIGURE 7**

**Californians’ Willingness to Pay to Address the Drought**

*Next, suppose this fee to address the impacts of droughts and improve local, regional and state water supply reliability and water quality were for \_\_\_\_\_. In that case, would you be very willing, somewhat willing, not too willing, or not at all willing to pay it?*



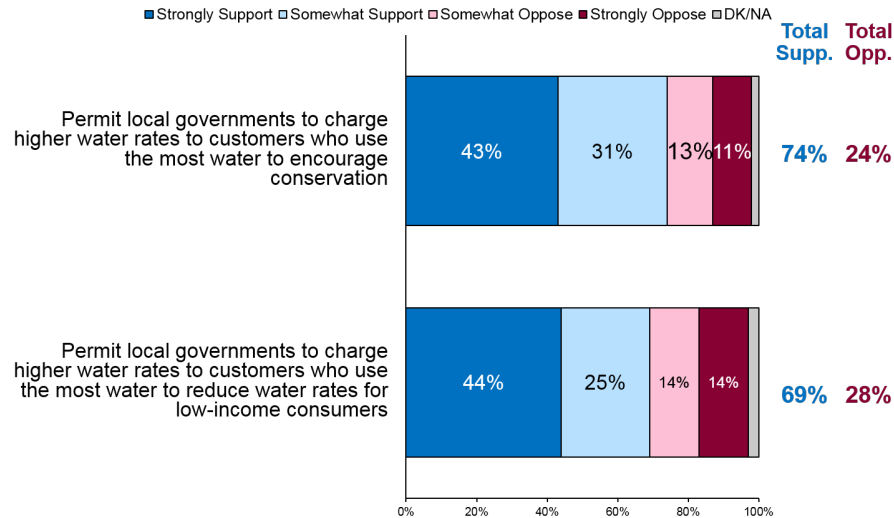
- **Voters strongly believe the heaviest water users should pay more.** As shown in **Figure 8** on the following page, three-quarters (74%) of voters favor charging heavy water users more to encourage conservation; nearly seven in ten (69%) favor doing so to reduce rates for low-income consumers. Support for this latter idea is consistent across demographic groups, and includes:

- ✓ 79 percent of Democrats, 73 percent of independents, and 52 percent of Republicans;
- ✓ 68 percent of white voters, 74 percent of Latinos and 76 percent of voters of color; and
- ✓ Voters in every region of the state, including 76 percent in Los Angeles County, 81 percent in the Bay Area, and 65 percent in the Central Valley.

FIGURE 8

**Support for Potential Water Policy Reforms**

*Now I am going to read some proposals that have been made for addressing California’s water supply issues. After I read each one, please tell me whether it sounds like something you would support or oppose.*



- **Finally, California voters say they would be more likely to vote for a state legislator who supported a package of reforms with a small increase in water bills.** After hearing details about California’s current drought, potential reforms, and considering increases in their water bills, voters were asked whether they would be more or less likely to vote for a legislator who supported water policy reform. Just one in five (20%) said they would be less likely, while more than two-thirds (67%) said they would be more likely to do so. This view cuts across party lines, and draws a positive reaction from Democrats (75%), independents (64%) and Republicans (55%).

Taken together, these survey results suggest that **California voters are ready and willing to support major and permanent changes in how the state manages water.** Their intense concern about the drought and belief that it is a lasting problem provide a solid attitudinal base on which to build support for bold reform. Changing state law to allow higher rates for the biggest water users is broadly popular, especially in Southern California. Also, voters clearly feel that lack of infrastructure worsens the impacts of the ongoing drought – and are willing to pay as much as \$4 per month to invest in upgrades. Along with the finding that few voters are satisfied with the state’s response to the drought, this indicates that legislators who support reform are likely to find that voters support their actions.

<sup>i</sup> **Methodology:** From July 6 – 13, 2015, FM3 completed 1,000 telephone interviews on landlines and cell phones with randomly selected California voters. The margin of sampling error is +/-3.1% at the 95% confidence level; margins of error for population subgroups within each sample will be higher. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.