

Does California have enough water for lots of new homes? Yes, experts say, despite drought



California officials have increasingly strict rules on water usage during the latest drought. But they also have plans to allow for more homebuilding. (Robert Gauthier/Los Angeles Times)

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To some, it defies common sense. California is once again in the middle of a punishing drought with state leaders telling people to take shorter showers and do fewer loads of laundry to conserve water. Yet at the same time, many of the same elected officials, pledging to solve the housing crisis, are pushing for the construction of millions of new homes.

“It’s the first question I’d always get,” said Jeffrey Kightlinger, who until last year ran the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the agency that delivers the water ultimately used by half the state’s population. “How in the world are you approving new housing when we’re running out of water?”

The answer, according to Kightlinger and other experts, is that there’s plenty of water available for new Californians if the 60-year trend of residents using less continues and accelerates into the future.

Case in point: Angelenos use 44% less water per person annually than they did four decades ago, according to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

Some of the changes that have freed up additional water supplies in the past, and could continue to free up water, go unnoticed by many people. New development almost always includes more water-efficient faucets, toilets, appliances and showers than older homes.

Other efforts, such as building wastewater recycling plants to increase water supply, might be costly, but are needed to adapt to more severe droughts with the warming climate.

The landscaping must change too. Think fewer lush lawns and grassy median strips and more gardens filled with native plants.

“The reality is we use water so inefficiently and so poorly, there’s so much opportunity to change that,” said Newsha Ajami, chief development officer for research at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. “A lot of that opportunity we can use to house people.”



[California could shrink water use in cities by 30% or more, study finds](#)

Most of California's water isn't used by people going about their daily lives at home or work. About 80% of water use statewide is for agriculture, with the rest for houses and businesses.

Of that remaining 20%, nearly half goes toward watering lawns and landscapes, washing cars or sidewalks, or filling pools and spas.

In the past, the state's population grew in tandem with water use. But that changed starting in the 1960s. Between 1967 and 2016, California's economy increased fivefold and the population doubled, yet water use rose by only 13%, [according to a new study by the Pacific Institute](#), a Bay Area think tank.

In more recent years, the shift has been even more startling. Since 2007, both total and per capita water use in the state has declined substantially. Total urban water use in 2016 was at levels not seen since the early 1990s, the report found.

"California has seen a major decoupling of water use and growth," said Heather Cooley, the Pacific Institute's research director and the report's lead author. "We are using water more efficiently. Those efforts have been incredibly effective."

Nevertheless, the report found that Californians still waste a lot of water. It determined that [the state could further reduce use by more than 30% in cities and suburbs](#) by investing in measures to use water more efficiently.

This means switching out grass lawns for native plants, upgrading leaky pipes and old appliances, recycling wastewater, and capturing stormwater to replenish aquifers.

"We can dramatically reduce our water use while still accommodating growth through efficiency improvements," Cooley said.

Some small rural and remote coastal areas will find it harder to have sufficient water supplies as droughts persist and climate change makes the state more arid. Central Valley farming towns [have seen their wells run dry](#) in recent years. Central Coast towns [have prohibitions on new housing](#) because of the lack of water.

But experts said these circumstances do not apply in urban areas of the state with broader and more diverse options for water.

When he was campaigning for office four years ago, Gov. Gavin Newsom [called for the development of 3.5 million new homes by 2025](#) to address the shortage at the root of the state's affordability problems. Housing construction [has been stagnant](#), and Newsom [has largely abandoned that promise](#). But his housing department has set a new goal for [the building of 2.5 million homes over the next eight years](#) to meet California's needs.

[**Newsom says he's done a good job fixing California's housing crisis. Facts say otherwise**](#)

State leaders not only are planning for a lot more housing but want to concentrate growth in major metropolitan areas. The reason has largely been framed in terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. California's climate regulators say that [the state will not meet its goals for cutting carbon pollution](#) unless residents drive less, necessitating that people live closer to where they work and shop.

Denser development also saves water because it has less outdoor landscaping than single-family home subdivisions.

Combining water savings with more compact growth patterns allows for a lot more people without stressing supply. A [separate Pacific Institute study from last year](#) found that the Bay Area could add more than 2 million jobs and homes over the next 50 years, accommodating nearly 7 million more people, and offset all water use from the larger population through that strategy.



[**To survive drought, parts of SoCal must cut water use by 35%. The new limit: 80 gallons a day**](#)

Yet the disconnect between elected officials [pressing Californians to cut water use in their daily routines](#) and arguing for more homes can still be jarring. What is needed in the short term and years from now is different, said Ellen Hanak, director of the Public Policy Institute of California's Water Policy Center.

People may need to tighten their water-usage belts during droughts while policymakers increase access to more resilient water supplies such as wastewater recycling, she said.

"There's long-term conservation ethic and there's being super careful during a drought," Hanak said. "And when we're talking about planning for housing, we're talking about the long term."

Kightlinger, the former Southern California water executive, had a ready response when people asked him about building new housing.

"I said, 'Your kids got to live somewhere,'" Kightlinger said. "If we do it efficiently and smartly, we can manage this."

Board Votes to Move Forward with Sprawl Development on Jersey Island

- [June 2, 2022](#)
- [Climate Change](#), [Contra Costa County](#), [Natural Landscapes](#)

On May 3, the Ironhouse Sanitary District Board of Directors passed a resolution approving the Jersey Island development proposal to move forward. As a result, Montezuma Water, the developer, will pursue inclusion of Jersey Island into the City of Oakley's Sphere of Influence (SOI) over the next year. This is just the first step towards annexation of Jersey Island into the City of Oakley—a multi-year process—which would be necessary for the existing proposal (including 450 single family homes, a hotel, a sports and rec center, and a wild animal park) to move forward. **Ultimately, Oakley residents will have to vote to extend the city's Urban Limit Line—a boundary that marks the outer limit beyond which urban development will not be allowed—to allow for annexation.**

At the May meeting, Leah Castella with the Ironhouse Sanitary District clarified that taking the next step in seeking to include Jersey Island in Oakley's SOI allows for future provision of services, whether that be extensive infrastructure development necessary for the development proposal, or provision of basic services to support low-impact parks and recreation uses. Additionally, the Board Members thoughtfully deliberated in the meeting and raised many valid concerns, including:

- Director Lowrey voiced her concerns about flood impacts at the site
- Director Zirkle (the only vote against) shared his concerns about the significant traffic impacts this project would have and the infrastructure and service requirements of this development
- Director Lauritzen plainly stated “I’m not a fan of the project at all” and shared his experiences and concerns about building in a flood zone

Even with these concerns and unanswered questions, the Board of Directors saw more value in moving forward with entitling the site rather than starting the process from scratch, resulting in the conditional approval of the proposed new use.

Gearing up to the May Board meeting, Greenbelt Alliance met individually with Ironhouse Sanitary District Board Members, Supervisor Burgis, County staff, the Montezuma team, and other stakeholders to share information on the risks this sprawl development poses to climate goals, economic viability, and public safety. While we are disappointed with the outcome of the most recent meeting, we will continue to advocate for more appropriate land uses on Jersey Island in the year ahead.

What's At Stake

Like many sprawl developments, the proposed project includes greenwashed language to describe potential site elements, such as “habitat refuge”, “specialty agriculture”, “mitigation”, and “clean energy”, but a deeper dive into the proposal tells a much different story.

The interior and northeast portion of the proposal shows roughly 800 acres of “wildlife and habitat refuge” including “significant visitor opportunities, including Safari tours of the rehabilitation and re-wilding centers and overnight stays with the animals.”

Greenbelt Alliance knows the value of habitat and restoration to restore natural systems and rebuild the Bay Area’s vital coastal ecosystems—but the existing development proposal does not reflect these values. Instead, it would introduce exotic non-native species to the island and further disrupt the essential habitat of existing species through development, increased traffic, and ecosystem disruption from new invasive species.

This is not the climate-smart development that Contra Costa County needs. Proceeding with this development will increase climate-related risks at the detriment of existing natural assets the area’s habitat, carbon sequestration, and associated ecosystem services provide.

Project History

On October 27, 2021, the proposal was presented to the Ironhouse Sanitary District (ISD) Board of Directors. They entered into an agreement with Montezuma Water LLC to consider new uses for Jersey Island in 2019. Jersey Island, located between Oakley and Bethel Island on the San Joaquin River, is currently owned and operated by the Ironhouse Sanitary District. The District uses the island for agriculture and grazing activities that use recycled water from the wastewater treatment plant to support production of over 2,000 tons of hay per year and support 2,200 head of cattle ([ISD](#)). Jersey Island is also the site of pipe infrastructure that transports recycled water from the wastewater treatment plant to an outflow in the San Joaquin River ([Board Report](#)).

The ISD issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) in 2018 to seek a partnership to consider alternative uses of Jersey Island. At that time, the ISD was motivated to issue an RFP because operation costs of the island (primarily levee maintenance and cattle operations) exceeded revenues. The ISD was also concerned about the liability of the levees and recognized in their RFP document that “most of Jersey Island is [4 to 18 feet] below sea level” and acknowledged that “climate change and associated sea level rise will significantly exacerbate this condition and place additional cost pressure on levee maintenance” ([Board Report](#)). In other words, the ISD is considering this new development to maximize revenue while also transferring liability for levee maintenance and sea level rise threats to the new inhabitants.

This proposed development may aid ISD’s near-term balance sheets, but it will come at an even greater cost to taxpayers and new residents as the adverse impacts pile up. Instead, we suggest ISD revisit the proposal to partner with East Bay Regional Parks District (EBRPD) to further develop Jersey Island’s recreational and habitat uses, which would conform with the County’s existing zoning, not require an extension of the [Urban Limit Line](#), and provide increased recreational amenities and access to the Delta without putting people, and infrastructure, at risk of climate impacts.