

Opinion: Calif. tries to cope without water

By Timothy Egan, New York Times

In a normal year, no one in California looks twice at a neighbor's lawn, that mane of bluegrass thriving in a sun-blasted desert. Or casts a scornful gaze at a fresh-planted almond grove, saplings that now stand accused of future water crimes. Or wonders why your car is conspicuously clean, or whether a fish deserves to live when a cherry tree will die.

Of course, there is nothing normal about the fourth year of the great drought: According to climate scientists, it may be the worst arid spell in 1,200 years. For all the fields that will go fallow, all the forests that will catch fire, all the wells that will come up dry, the lasting impact of this drought for the ages will be remembered, in the most exported term of California start-ups, as a disrupter.

"We are embarked upon an experiment that no one has ever tried," said Gov. Jerry Brown in early April, in ordering the first mandatory statewide water rationing for cities.

Surprising, perhaps even disappointing to those with schadenfreude for the nearly 39 million people living in year-round sunshine, California will survive. It's not going to blow away. The economy, now on a robust rebound, is not going to collapse. There won't be a Tom Joad load of S.U.V.s headed north. Rains, and snow to the high Sierra, will eventually return.

But California, from this drought onward, will be a state transformed. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was human-caused, after the grasslands of the Great Plains were ripped up, and the land thrown to the wind. It never fully recovered. The California drought of today is mostly nature's hand,

diminishing an Eden created by man. The Golden State may recover, but it won't be the same place.

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