

Water fetching record prices in California

By Garance Burke, AP

SAN FRANCISCO – Throughout California's desperately dry Central Valley, those with water to spare are cashing in.

As a third parched summer forces farmers to fallow fields and lay off workers, two water districts and a pair of landowners in the heart of the state's farmland are making millions of dollars by auctioning off their private caches.

Nearly 40 others also are seeking to sell their surplus water this year, according to state and federal records.

Economists say it's been decades since the water market has been this hot. In the last five years alone, the price has grown tenfold to as much as \$2,200 an acre-foot – enough to cover a football field with a foot of water.

Unlike the previous drought in 2009, the state has been hands-off, letting the market set the price even though severe shortages prompted a statewide drought emergency declaration this year.

The price spike comes after repeated calls from scientists that global warming will worsen droughts and increase the cost of maintaining California's strained water supply systems.

Some water economists have called for more regulations to keep aquifers from being depleted and ensure the market is not subject to manipulation such as that seen in the energy crisis of summer 2001, when the state was besieged by rolling blackouts.

"If you have a really scarce natural resource that the state's economy depends on, it would be nice to have it run

efficiently and transparently,” said Richard Howitt, professor emeritus at UC Davis.

Private water sales are becoming more common in states that have been hit by drought, including Texas and Colorado.

In California, the sellers include those who hold claims on water that date back a century, private firms who are extracting groundwater and landowners who stored water when it was plentiful in underground caverns known as water banks.

“This year the market is unbelievable,” said Thomas Greci, the general manager of the Madera Irrigation District, which recently made nearly \$7 million from selling about 3,200 acre-feet. “And this is a way to pay our bills.”

All of the district’s water went to farms; the city of Santa Barbara, which has its own water shortages, was outbid.

The prices are so high in some rural pockets that water auctions have become a spectacle.

One agricultural water district amid the almond orchards and derrick fields northwest of Bakersfield recently announced it would sell off extra water it acquired through a more than century-old right to use flows from the Kern River.

Local TV crews and journalists flocked to the district’s office in February to watch as manager Maurice Etchechury unveiled bids enclosed in about 50 sealed envelopes before the cameras.

“Now everyone’s mad at me saying I increased the price of water. I didn’t do it, the weather did it,” said Etchechury, who manages the Buena Vista Water Storage District, which netted about \$13.5 million from the auction of 12,000 acre-feet of water.

Competition for water in California is heightened by the state’s geography: The north has the water resources but the

biggest water consumers are to the south, including most of the country's produce crops.

The amount shipped south through a network of pumps, pipes and aqueducts is limited by the drought and legal restrictions on pumping to save a threatened fish.

During the last drought, the state Department of Water Resources ran a drought water bank, which helped broker deals between those who were short of water and those who had plenty. But several environmental groups sued, alleging the state failed to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act in approving the sales, and won.

This year, the state is standing aside, saying buyers and sellers have not asked for the state's help. "We think that buyers and sellers can negotiate their own deals better than the state," said Nancy Quan, a supervising engineer with the department.

Quan's department, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the State Water Resources Control Board have tracked at least 38 separate sales this year, but the agencies are not aware of all sales, nor do they keep track of the price of water sold, officials said.

The maximum volume that could change hands through the 38 transactions is 730,323 acre-feet, which is about 25 percent of what the State Water Project has delivered to farms and cities in an average year in the last decade.

That figure still doesn't include the many private water sales that do not require any use of government-run pipes or canals, including the three chronicled by the AP. It's not clear however how much of this water will be sold via auctions.

Some of those in the best position to sell water this year have been able to store their excess supplies in underground banks, a tool widely embraced in the West for making water

supplies reliable and marketable. The area surrounding Bakersfield is home to some of the country's largest water banks.

The drought is so severe that aggressive pumping of the banked supplies may cause some wells to run dry by year's end, said Eric Averett, general manager the Rosedale Rio Bravo District, located next to several of the state's largest underground caches.

Farther north in the long, flat Central Valley, others are drilling new wells to sell off groundwater.

A water district board in Stanislaus County approved a pilot project this month to buy up to 26,000 acre-feet of groundwater pumped over two years from 14 wells on two landowners' parcels in neighboring Merced County.

Since the district is getting no water from the federal government this year, the extra water will let farmers keep their trees alive, said Anthea Hansen, general manager of the arid Del Puerto Water District.

Hansen estimated growers would ultimately pay \$775 to \$980 an acre-foot – a total of roughly \$20 million to \$25.5 million.

"We have to try to keep them alive," Hansen said. "It's too much loss in the investment and the local economy to not try."

Fishing fees waived for one day in Calif.

July 5 is the first of two free fishing days in California in 2014.

All fishing regulations, such as bag and size limits, gear restrictions, report card requirements, fishing hours and stream closures remain in effect. Every angler must have an appropriate report card if they are fishing for steelhead or sturgeon anywhere in the state, or salmon in the Smith and Klamath-Trinity river systems.

Free Fishing Days provide a low-cost way to give fishing a try. The next free day is Sept. 6.

The science of turning plants into booze

By Chris Mooney, Mother Jones

It's the 4th of July, and you love your country. Your likely next step: Get ready for the fireworks and drink a lot of beer.

But that last word ought to trouble you a little. Beer? Is that really the best you can do? Isn't it a little, er, uncreative?

Amy Stewart has some better ideas for you. Author of the New York Times bestselling book "The Drunken Botanist: The Plants That Create The World's Great Drinks", she's a master of the wild diversity of ways in which, since time immemorial, human civilizations (virtually all of them) have created alcoholic drinks from the sugars of their native plants.

"We have really good evidence – like analyzing the residue on pottery shards– really good evidence of people making some kind of alcoholic beverage going back at least 10,000 years,

and probably much longer than that,” says Stewart on the latest episode of the Inquiring Minds podcast.

In other words, human beings pretty much always find a way when it comes to getting hammered. Indeed, you could argue that learning how to do so was one of the first human sciences. In a sense, it’s closely akin to capturing and using solar energy: Making alcohol, too, hinges upon tapping into the power created by the sun.

“It is not much of an exaggeration to claim that the very process that gives us the raw ingredients for brandy and beer is the same one that sustains life on the planet,” writes Stewart in “The Drunken Botanist”.

Similarities in U.S. today compared to 1776

By Dave Richards

This year’s Fourth of July marks the 237th birthday of the United States of America. Between then and now, the country and the world have changed in ways the Founding Fathers, including George Washington, likely never imagined.

From our vantage point in history we can appreciate how much things have changed; but, on the other hand, there are many national issues today that remain eerily similar to the problems faced 237 years ago.

History not only allows us to appreciate what those before us endured, but also reminds us of the lessons we apparently have

yet to learn.

Here are some common denominators linking Revolutionary War-era America to the country we live in today:

- Desertions were such a problem that George Washington actually feared the Continental Army might dissolve. When the Revolutionary War began, soldiers were enthusiastic about fighting for independence. But once they realized that the war was not going to end soon and started to endure severe hardships, their enthusiasm to fight diminished and huge numbers of them deserted.

Now, of course, the subject of desertion is getting much attention. Despite the fact that we simply don't know the full story behind Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl's former status as a POW, many citizens are dissatisfied with the deal to free him in exchange for five prominent Taliban prisoners, because they perceive Bergdahl as a deserter.

- George Washington and Alexander Hamilton actually feared the Revolution might be followed by chaos or even a civil war. Of course, the American Civil War eventually did follow, and resentment from fringe groups lingers in the South today.

Additionally, contemporary separatist movements have emerged throughout the United States, including Texas, Alaska, North Colorado, South Florida, Upper Peninsula (Michigan), Baja Arizona, State of Jefferson (Northern California and southern Oregon), South California, Cook County (Illinois), Northwest Angle (Minnesota), Independent Long Island, Northern Virginia, Killington (Vermont) and Western Maryland.

- National lotteries were established by the Continental Congress as a way to help finance the war. By any standards of the 18th century, the American army was a rag-tag group with insufficient resources. So Congress resorted to try, among other things, national lotteries to pay for goods, which were sorely needed in Washington's shanty army camps.

Today some states use lotteries to obtain revenue for educational purposes. But given the United States' standing on educational standards among first-world countries, one could argue that what's lacking is the kind of will, leadership and ingenuity that won us the war against the British.

- During the Revolutionary War we had term limits; no delegate could serve for more than three years during any six-year period.

As Congress' low job approval rating has hovered around 15 and 16 percent between 2010 and 2014, according to Gallup, and with Tea party members and others calling for term limits, many are feeling closer to their Revolutionary-era roots. Various American interest groups would like to see a return of term limits.

- Soldiers and officers in the Continental Army went months, if not years, without pay during the war. In the autumn of 1782, many Revolutionary War officers in the Hudson Highlands were angry and frustrated that they had not been paid in months – years, for some. Eventually, the anger and frustration led to a budding army insurrection known as the Newburgh Conspiracy, which Washington fortunately snuffed out.

Today we see Americans growing almost as angry and frustrated as they hear about the trouble with the Department of Veterans Affairs – its struggles to treat nearly 9 million vets, and the dozens of VA facilities now under investigation after complaints about falsified records and treatment delays, which may have led to patient deaths and a cover-up by top administrators in Phoenix. After the resignation of former department head Eric Shinseki, House Speaker John Boehner is calling for more action to correct the VA's struggles.

Dave Richards is the author of "Swords in Their Hands: George Washington and the Newburgh Conspiracy". Richards served seven years in the U.S. Army, primarily in military intelligence.

Opinion: El Dorado County on the right course

Publisher's note: El Dorado County officials were not able to provide a record of this opinion piece being discussed in open session during a Board of Supervisors meeting. Therefore it was done so in a serial meeting, which is a violation of the Brown Act – California's open meeting law.

To the community,

We ask the public to join the county Board of Supervisors in our commitment to create a renaissance regarding the county's reputation. For starters, Terri Daly has been working at our direction for almost four years and we want you to know that we support our chief administrative officer who is working effectively to advance critically important initiatives to modernize county government so it can be something we leave in good shape for the next generation.

It is time for a cultural transformation in El Dorado County and we want everyone on board. Collaboration is what leads to effective problem solving. It's what leads to innovation. We simply can't create the exciting future we want for El Dorado County without first establishing a positive culture to the benefit of employees, businesses (new and established) as well as our citizenry.

We are committed to improving communication channels – enhancing the frequency and extent to which we provide external outreach to stakeholders and the media. We want and need the public's involvement, and open communication will help get us there.

Without an informed public, we miss opportunities to “think outside the box.” Without a motivated workforce, we fall behind neighboring counties capitalizing on competitive economic incentives and the type of “idea storming” that comes from colleagues and leadership working well together and displaying mutual respect.

We have directed the CAO to focus on five areas where we want available resources to net a return on our investment for the future:

- Human resources and risk management
- Information technologies
- Facilities
- Department accountability and culture
- Economic development

The CAO, at our direction, recently delivered on a recommended budget that keeps costs in line while embracing priority-based budgeting enabling government to reassess priorities in order to make sound, long-term funding decisions. The process clearly establishes the priorities of the county, then develops practices, processes and procedures that fund and advance those priorities. It puts into motion a mission-driven organization with local government leaders who are seeking service excellence, transparency and a strong desire to achieve the results that are truly important to their community.

We give our administrative team high marks for the following:

- Producing a responsible balanced budget for four years in a row, and successfully bringing the county out of the recession with healthy reserves and no debt.
- Trimming facilities costs by saving \$600,000 a year through

termination or renegotiation of over-market rates on building leases (savings will continue annually starting this year).

- A total of \$6 million in one-time savings with construction efficiencies achieved that no one thought possible in the building of a new Animal Services Shelter.

One of our top priorities is the roll out of a workplace action plan that will transform the organizational culture of the county. Why should our citizens care about an internal culture change? For good reason. If we can tackle long-simmering workplace issues, employee morale will improve. Already, the Health and Human Services job turnover rate has improved from 50 percent to 15 percent; enabling us to better serve those clients. Customer service is improving.

New companies eyeing the El Dorado Hills Business Park and other commercial space are more inclined to bring jobs here because the professionalism and motivation of county employees will continue to improve. We'll also retain and attract employees empowered to create vibrant organizations serving the best interest of its citizens. With the labor market improving, we need to hang onto our best and brightest talent and be poised to attract more. Luck won't improve the county; it will be preparedness and meeting opportunity.

The above action plan gets under way as a grand jury report comes out taking a close and critical look at the County Charter. It proposes specific and controversial recommendations. We need to be cognizant that discord will keep us stagnant and unprepared if all it does is keep us looking in a rearview mirror whilst other counties around us power out of the recession. There is a process in place to address the issues. A Charter Review Committee, convened every five years to consider changes to the Charter will examine the recommendations.

Also, the Board of Supervisors will officially respond to the grand jury report within the mandated 90 days. We'll also respond to the Charter Review Committee's recommendations. After that, it could be up to the voters to cast the final say over any modifications to the County Charter – potentially as early as the general election in November.

Let's let the administrative teams including the elected officials do their jobs. The Board of Supervisors keeps our taxpayers' interests in the forefront of our actions.

Until then, look forward, not in the rearview mirror, because the future demands we do so or El Dorado County may be left behind in the dust of counties more willing and able to move ahead. Join us as we build a better reputation for a county with so much to offer and the people who can make it happen. Together we can truly make a difference as we leverage the unique and amazing resources that make El Dorado County a great place to live, work and play.

Supervisors Norma Santiago, Ron Mikulaco, Brian Veerkamp and Ron Briggs

Extra patrols to enforce rules on USFS beaches

U.S. Forest Service personnel are doing what they can to not have a repeat of last Fourth of July when Ski Beach on the South Shore nearly became a riot scene.

To help the regular law enforcement officers, five California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control and five El Dorado County probation officers will be assisting with patrols. They

will be dispersed this weekend starting July 4 at all the USFS beaches.

Officers will be making sure everyone is abiding by the rules, which includes cracking down on underage drinking.

CHP to conduct DUI checkpoint on South Shore

The California Highway Patrol will conduct a sobriety/driver license checkpoint on July 5 on Highway 50 between Pioneer Trail and Highway 89.

The goal is to target roads where there is a high frequency of drunken driving.

Funding for this program was provided by a grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety, through the Transportation Agency.

Price of July 4 picnic a bit higher than last year

An all-American Fourth of July picnic will cost slightly more this year, but still comes in at less than \$6 per person,

according to the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Farm Bureau's informal survey reveals the average cost for a summer picnic for 10 is \$58.72, or \$5.87 per person. That's about a 5 percent increase compared to 2013.

Part of the increase has to do with retail meat prices being higher because the nation's cattle herd is at a historically small level, the Farm Bureau said. The total number of hogs farmers across the nation are raising is also down.

AFBF's summer picnic menu for 10 consists of hot dogs and buns, cheeseburgers and buns, pork spare ribs, deli potato salad, baked beans, corn chips, lemonade, chocolate milk, watermelon, and ketchup and mustard.

GOP: EPA rule could ruin Fourth of July

By Michael Bastasch, Daily Caller

While Americans get ready for the thousands of fireworks shows that will be occurring across the country this weekend, Republicans are warning that pending federal water regulations could ruin fireworks displays next year.

The Environmental Protection Agency is trying to expand its authority under the Clean Water Act. Republicans warn that the agency's proposal to expand the definition of "waters of the United States" could allow the EPA to regulate bodies of water on private property.

Republicans are now warning that EPA water rules could threaten fireworks by allowing environmental activists to sue and shut down shows across the country.

“If the proposed ‘waters of the United States’ rule becomes final and serves as the eventual basis for future citizen suits against those who organize fireworks shows, we fear fewer homeowners, communities, or local organizations will be able to conduct fireworks displays as they have for decades or longer,” wrote Republican Senators, including David Vitter of Louisiana and John Barrasso of Wyoming, in a letter to the EPA.

Environmentalists have already been using litigation to stop fireworks shows from happening near or over federally protected waters. Environmentalists sued the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority alleging their fireworks show violated the Clean Water Act.

Environmentalists said the fireworks show would result in the unpermitted discharge of pollutants into the lake. The lawsuit demanded that Lake Tahoe pay \$37,500 per day in penalties for each violation of the Clean Water Act. Lake Tahoe officials nearly canceled the show. The lawsuit was settled in April.

“By expanding federal Clean Water Act jurisdiction to include ditches, small streams, ponds, and other purely local waterbodies, EPA and the [Army Corps of Engineers] may be exposing landowners and municipalities across the country to costly citizen suit litigation if they should attempt to conduct a neighborhood fireworks show,” Republicans wrote.

“Commemorative fireworks displays have been a part of our nation’s history since its founding. However, there are individuals and groups who would like to significantly limit this tradition through heavy-handed citizen suit litigation under the Clean Water Act and other laws,” Republicans added.

In March, the EPA published its proposed “waters of the United

States” rule. The agency said the rule was meant to clear up confusion surrounding two federal court decisions on the agency’s Clean Water Act authority.

But Republicans have said it’s no more than a power grab by the Obama administration. The rule could allow federal agents to regulate water on private property, they warned.

“As expected, the EPA’s proposed water rule expands the agency’s control over natural and man-made streams, lakes, ponds and wetlands,” said Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas. “If approved, this rule could allow the EPA to regulate virtually every body of water in the United States.”

The EPA’s draft rule defines “waters of the United States” as “traditional navigable waters; interstate waters, including interstate wetlands; the territorial seas; impoundments of traditional navigable waters, interstate waters, including interstate wetlands, the territorial seas, and tributaries, as defined, of such waters; tributaries, as defined, of traditional navigable waters, interstate waters, or the territorial seas; and adjacent waters, including adjacent wetlands.”

But the agency says additional bodies of water could be regulated if they have a “significant nexus” to a “traditional navigable water, interstate water, or the territorial seas.” The EPA says it will provide a definition of “significant nexus” when the rule is published.

These waters need not even be navigable – the type of water body the federal government has traditionally regulated. Republicans have questioned how the EPA could justify regulating water bodies that are no longer connected to navigable waterways or other traditionally regulated bodies of water.

“In preparing this proposal, the EPA failed to incorporate adequate peer-reviewed science in accordance with the agency’s

own statutory obligations,” Smith said. “It’s troubling that the administration proposed this expansion before its independent science advisers have had the chance to complete its review of the underlying science. The Obama administration continues to sidestep scientific integrity in order to fast track an abusive regulatory agenda.”

DUI checkpoint in Douglas County on July 4

Several Northern Nevada law enforcement agencies will be putting extra officers on the street this weekend.

On Friday afternoon and evening, police officers from the Reno and Sparks police departments, deputies from the Washoe, Lyon and Douglas counties sheriff’s offices, and troopers from the Nevada Highway Patrol will be conducting the DUI road block on Highway 50 in Douglas County.

The DUI checkpoint is funded by the Joining Forces grant secured by the Nevada Office of Traffic Safety and paid for by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.