Challenged By Drought, Fire, Earthquake, and Flood, California Departs On New Path

By Keith Schneider

Circle of Blue

OROVILLE, CA — Until visitors peer over the crest of 234-meter (770-foot) Oroville Dam, which stores the cold Sierra waters of the Feather River and is the tallest dam in the United States, it's hard to tell a drought grips Butte County or any of the other neighboring Central Valley counties in this part of northern California.

The dirt-lined transport canals are filled to the top with water that slakes the thirst of thousands of hectares of rice, sunflowers, peaches, corn, soybeans, and all manner of California's agricultural cornucopia. Unlike the southern reaches of the Central Valley, there's no sign of the empty spaces of brown dirt where tomato fields lie fallow, or where laser-levelled orchards under moisture duress have been ripped out.

Quite the contrary. The region's bullet-straight two-lane highways pass by new orchards under cultivation, the roots of each infant tree politely dressed in swirls of drip irrigation line and saluted by the short red plastic stake of a single spray irrigator. More surprising are the throngs of sunburned bathers and Jet Ski operators enjoying the deep cooling depths of two blue and bountiful manmade lakes that flank Highway 162, the primary route to enter this city of 16,000 residents and to climb the Sierra foothills to reach the dam and its visitors center.

The sight from the trail across the dam's spillway describes a much different story. The Lake Oroville reservoir, California's second largest, is at 42 percent of capacity, according to the state Department of Water Resources. It looks it. Two million of its 3.5 million acre feet are gone. A bathtub ring of rock and soil, 61 meters (200 feet) wide, circles the lake like a light brown rebuke to the will of its essential purpose.

A Drain on Storage

Week by week the ring grows a little wider as the reservoir drains to irrigate fields and supply thirsty towns across the state that receive Lake Oroville's liquid offering. The steadily receding water level is intently followed along the Sierra front like the win-loss record of high school football teams. "What's happening is kind of out of our hands," said Karen Wilson, a mother of two young children, who works part-time at an Oroville convenience store. "We do what we can. Don't wash the car. Short showers. Live with brown grass. Dishwater on the gardens. You kind of hope the people in charge of the big stuff know what they're doing."

In much of the skeptical, government-suspicious United States that's an odd appeal—looking to the authorities for guidance. In a matter of fact way, though, Wilson expresses the conviction held by most Californians that the authorities are actually capable of responding well to urgent conditions.

In two weeks of travel across northern California, and in interviews with water and energy resource authorities in Oakland, Sacamento, Davis, and Modesto, a visitor from the grumpy Midwest became convinced Californians have strong reasons for putting their trust in "the people in charge."

More so than any state in the United States, and nearly any region of the world, the people in charge of California have shown a capacity to recognize and reckon with deep drought, high heat, sea level rise, and several more of the high risk ecological realities of the 21st century. The result is a state that has set out on a very new path for building its economy and sustaining quality of life on a foundation of legal requirements fit for the time—drastically reducing climate emissions, increasing energy efficiency, requiring net zero energy use in new buildings, conserving water, and electrifying transportation.

Frankly, in a world that is largely ignoring the regular outbursts of a truculent planet, it’s a relief. Thank goodness for California.