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February 2, 2014: The California Drought

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Title: The California Drought

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2/2/2014—News today that the California State Water Project will stop any allotment of water to the 25 million people and 1 million acres of farmland that it usually serves. The drought California is experiencing was called in the New York Times today, the worst in 500 years. Authorities were quick to note that this does not mean Californians will go thirsty. It means that local water must be found to make up the difference at a time that many parts of the State are experiencing drought—though some parts are not. California has been experiencing below normal rain for three years. And a look at the U.S. Drought Monitor for today shows that most of America west of the Mississippi river is experiencing abnormally dry weather as well. This is also the new normal. A story on NPR this week reported that though Las Vegas has cut water consumption by 1/3 in the past 5 years, authorities there are warning of new cuts to come. There are policy alternatives to help deal with these dry conditions. Water in Las Vegas, for example, is still among the cheapest in the United States. Rising water prices will husband this resource more intelligently. But, in the end, if the conditions we see today are not drought, but the beginning of a new climate in the western United States, the beginning of expanding desertification, then there is no combination of policies that will cope with the new reality. If that is the case, then too many people live in the west and too much food is grown there to be sustained. Obviously, I believe that these new conditions are part of a long range drying caused by climate warming—whatever temporary conditions are also contributing right now. But, aside from causation, the drought in the west shows how absurd economic thinking is that suggests we can adapt to global warming. People will adapt, of course, but the pain and dislocation will be enormous. Ask the people in the west today whether they would be willing to spend some money on sustainable energy sources if it meant the end of the drought? They sure would. Prevention was always cheaper and better than coping with disaster.