

Drought puts spotlight on water thefts



Folsom Dam creates one of California's main water storage areas. Photo/LTN

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

It's amazingly easy to steal water from a California stream. Even in this epic drought, the state has no way of monitoring exactly who is tapping into its freshwater supplies and how much they take. And those who do get caught taking water they have no right to often are allowed to keep taking it for years just by promising to obtain a permit.

Nearly 30,000 entities in the state hold valid water diversion permits, including individual property owners, farmers and water utilities. Some have meters or gauges to measure their diversions, but the state has no ability of its own to monitor those gauges in real-time. People and entities with water rights are required to regularly report their water use to the state, but many don't, and the state has no way of knowing if their accounts – self-reported – are truthful.

In average water years, many of these issues don't matter much. But the weaknesses are expected to complicate matters this year as the state struggles to stretch limited water

supplies during the worst drought in 40 years. This spring, it is likely the State Water Resources Control Board will order some water rights holders to divert less water to ensure enough flow for cities and wildlife, something that has not been done since the drought of 1976-77. The state's ability to enforce such curtailment orders will be sorely tested.

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