

Big money, many actors, little oversight of Calif. water

By Tim Reid, Reuters

In the middle of one of the worst droughts in California's history, no one knows exactly how many agencies supply the state with water.

While state regulators supervise three companies that provide gas and electricity for most of California, drinking water is delivered through a vast network of agencies which collectively do billions of dollars of business, setting rates and handing out contracts with scant oversight.

There are so many agencies, in fact, that the California Department of Water Resource, which is responsible for managing and protecting the state's water, concedes that it does not even know the exact number.

"We think the total number is about 3,000 but there is no definitive resting place for those numbers," a department spokesman said.

Some state officials and water experts are calling for change, arguing that the process of providing water should be as clear as the product, especially in the middle of a drought. As one of the nation's agricultural leaders and a trendsetter in environmental regulation, California's actions could be felt beyond its borders.

Wes Strickland, an attorney who specializes in water law, says most of these water agencies do a good job. Cities and towns like controlling their own resources, and most of the agencies are elected, assuring a level of accountability.

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