



Trump's longtime strategy of 'flooding the zone' — aka overwhelming opponents with a flurry of announcements and superficial initiatives — took a *literal* turn last week, when his administration ordered the release of a significant amount of water from two dams in the Central Valley to try to score political points.

As the [New York Times reported](#), the water dump won't do anything to serve the supposed policy objectives — to help Southern California firefighters and Central Valley farmers. It's actually more likely to hurt farmers later in spring and summer months when irrigation is more critical. Instead, Trump's emergency order unleashing [2 billion gallons over three days](#) with little warning first sent [local water officials scrambling](#) to prevent rivers from flooding and then scratching their heads about the point of filling rivers, streams and diversion canals that are separated from Los Angeles by mountain ranges and some 150 miles.

The point was to troll Californians and propagandize. "Photo of beautiful water flow that I just opened in California," Trump posted on social media. This is just the latest attempt by Trump to absurdly claim that "maximizing" water supplies throughout California would have prevented the devastating Eaton and Palisades fires. The amount of water available to fight these fires is not the problem, of course. Despite drought conditions, Southern California

reservoirs have been at or above regular levels before the fires. (Emmett Institute and Luskin Center faculty have fact-checked these and other claims [here](#) and [here](#).)

Much of the reporting on Trump's water play was rightfully skeptical, not only from the California-based reporters of the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, but also the local beat reporter at the nonprofit news site [SJV Water](#), who broke the story. We're going to need this no-nonsense reporting in the days, weeks, and months ahead. And we're going to need to hear from farmers and firefighters who call BS. "A decision to take summer water from local farmers and dump it out of these reservoirs shows a complete lack of understanding of how the system works and sets a very dangerous precedent," one water manager [told](#) SJV Water. (Someone get that guy on X and TikTok stat.)

Trump's dump is a good metaphor for how topic experts and journalists should be thinking about his second administration. The White House is going to keep flooding the zone. Expose the flood for what it is: a wasteful, ineffective trickle.



The Tule River (CC BY 2.0)

Dubious talking points, half-truths, and lies about all kinds of California regulations will be flowing freely on Capitol Hill later this week (Thursday, Feb. 6) at [a scheduled House Judiciary subcommittee](#) on "California Fires and the Consequences of Overregulation." That subcommittee's chair Rep. Scott Fitzgerald, (R-Wis) has claimed, like Trump, that the LA fire disaster was a preventable tragedy, and that Congress should examine California's

regulations. “For years, California’s liberal government has prioritized environmental activism over effective forest management and disaster mitigation,” Fitzgerald said in advance of the hearing.

So, who are the California policy experts on whom Congress is relying? The subcommittee will call three witnesses: Steve Hilton, founder of [Golden Together](#); Steven Greenhut, resident senior fellow and western region director of state affairs for the [R Street Institute](#); and Edward Ring, director of water and energy policy for the [California Policy Center](#). Don’t feel bad if you don’t recognize the names — they’re not really water policy experts though they write Op Eds and appear on Fox News to push deregulation.

I asked my UCLA colleague and urban planning expert Gregory Pierce, director of both the UCLA Water Resources Group and the Human Right to Water Solutions Lab as well as a Co-Executive Director of the Luskin Center for Innovation. “The three individuals giving testimony have no track record or following in informing the California water research or policy space, even among those who want more North-South transfers,” he said. “I had never heard of them before the Trump administration began to form in late fall.”

More than any specific policy qualification, what they seem to share is a common enemy in the California Environmental Quality Act ([CEQA](#)), one of California’s most important environmental laws. Hilton worked for the British Prime Minister David Cameron of all people and is a Fox News contributor who in 2023 founded Golden Together — which he calls “non-partisan” though he’s been a vocal Trump supporter since 2016 (and still is, like here on Fox over the weekend [gushing](#) over Trump’s tariffs). Hilton pushed a 2024 ballot measure proposal to radically change who can use CEQA to challenge developments, which the [SF Chronicle](#) referred to as a “developer giveaway.” The second witness Greenhut is a former news columnist who has written articles and books supporting “free market water reforms” while at the R Street Initiative and the Pacific Research Institute, a pair of center-right think tanks that favor limited government. He has opined that California could “abolish” permitting rules. “If building regulations are an impediment during an emergency,” he writes at [Reason](#), “aren’t they also an impediment during normal times?” The third witness Ring [wants to scrap](#) 10 water laws and has blamed, sans evidence, the [diversity, equity, and inclusion practices](#) at the LA Department of Water and Power and LA Fire Department, among other things, for the destruction. He’s written [reports](#) with Hilton about abolishing all sorts of building codes and permitting requirements.

Sure sounds like the House hearing about the LA fires is going to focus on CEQA, not disasters. Any focus on CEQA would highlight “how little these individuals understand how the front lines of water supply-wildfire fighting works,” Pierce told me, because CEQA is

important in this context but only for the speed of capital project construction.

“The most important water ideas, which we can and should consider — although none are easy or cheap — as we try to make infrastructure more resilient in fighting wildfires are much broader than CEQA, and are in the mechanics of how publicly-regulated water systems operate and are financed,” Pierce said. “These are issues best vetted and addressed through a variety of channels beyond CEQA: state legislation, DWR and SWRCB study and directives, the Safe Drinking Water Act and relevant state water code reforms, as well as local public finance mechanisms, including the arcane capital improvement and rate making planning processes of individual water systems.”

As Pierce notes, there are certainly plenty of water managers and policy specialists in the state who favor moving greater amounts of water from north to south — including Governor Gavin Newsom — but they won’t be speaking at Thursday’s hearing, and that speaks volumes regarding even their apparent hesitance to align with the administration’s approach to this issue. There are also significant steps we can take at the local, state, and federal levels to prevent disasters like this in the future, but those are unlikely to come up at the hearing either. All the more reason for Los Angeles and California policymakers to lead the way on real solutions, from rebuilding communities in ways that impede supercharged fires to reducing climate pollution.

Prepare for a flood of disinformation about California regulations — claims that clearly don’t hold water.