

Water ruling casts shadow on growth

Don't blame the smelt. A district judge cited the danger of wiping out the tiny Sacramento Delta fish when he imposed tough restrictions that threaten Southern California's water supply. But if it hadn't been the smelt, it would have been something else.

Eventually, something was going to arise to make the state face the fact that its water demands can't keep going up indefinitely while the water supply keeps shrinking.

The preciousness of water in this semidesert state is something that has escaped the attention of California's politicians. That's because all they can see is how growth replenishes public treasuries and provides more money to squander every year.

State and local politicians routinely rubber-stamp new developments with little thought to environmental preservation or the strain on water supply.

Something had to give.

The expected result of the ruling last week is the threat of water rationing that would hit many Southern California communities hard. For most of us, it means adopting a perpetual-drought mind-set and conserving at every level. That means low-flow toilets and drought-resistant plants. For agriculture, it will mean a hard economic punch. And for politicians, it ought to mean a serious rethinking of land-use policy.

Some will dismiss this as an overreaction to the possible extinction of a little-known fish. But concentrating on the water rights of smelt vs. humans misses the entire point: We don't have unlimited amounts of water.

If there isn't enough water for smelt or people, how can we continue to allow major construction developments that bring in more people who need more water and force more rationing on current residents?

The answer is we can't.

The largest user of delta water, the Metropolitan Water District, has already made plans for rationing water to its

18 million users. No doubt every agency affected will do the same.

The MWD, the primary water importer for Southern California's urban areas, could lose as much as 30 percent of its supplies from Northern California in 2008 if Judge Oliver W. Wanger's preliminary ruling holds.

California's history has been one of opportunity and open horizons and the dream for millions of new and potential residents. This ruling makes it clear the future must be different for the state to continue to prosper.

Water can be used more wisely, stronger conservation measures can be introduced, and future developments need to meet stringent land-use planning rules and pay a hefty premium for that most basic of all necessities, water.