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H. David Nahai: Water Day time to reflect on world crisis

By Gretchen McClain and H. David Nahai Gretchen McClain is president of fluid and motion control at ITT Corporation. H. David Nahai is the former chief executive officer and general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Posted: 03/22/2011 12:00:00 AM PDT

Today is World Water Day, a day designed to draw attention to the global water crisis and the drastic actions needed to address it. Southern California is certainly not immune to this crisis. The recent statewide shortages, caused by droughts and severe cut backs in water deliveries from the Owens Valley, the Colorado River and the Bay Delta, underscore this urgency.

California's water system, designed to supply water to 16 million people, struggles to serve nearly 40 million residents. Daily, Los Angeles alone sees an average of four water main breaks, despite an ongoing (but underfunded) reliability program. All told, the state loses 10 percent of its water every year due to aging infrastructure. In a region already familiar with severe water shortages, wasting so much water is untenable. And the problem extends well beyond California. The federal government estimates water lost just from water main breaks is worth about \$2.6 billion annually.

California must find new sources of water through additional conservation, wastewater recycling, rainfall capture, aquifer remediation, run off management, new building standards, and the more efficient treatment and conveyance of water. However, all of these strategies require significant investment in new water infrastructure. Additionally, our existing infrastructure is crumbling under the combined pressures of population growth, rapid urbanization and chronic underinvestment. While tackling these challenges

may seem costly, we must remember the high price we presently pay in the form of wasted water, wasted energy, lost productivity and risks to public health.

The solution is as simple as it is complex: We must increase funding and investment to protect the resource we value above nearly all others. As with anything we value, protecting our access to clean drinking water is not free. Nationally, the Environmental Protection Agency has estimated that approximately \$1 trillion will be needed to pay for water and wastewater infrastructure over the next 20 years. We are currently falling well short of this figure to the tune of about \$19 billion per year.

While clearly much more needs to be done by the state and at the federal level, the solution cannot come from public funding alone. Overcoming our nation's infrastructure gap falls in large part to the local water utilities and to water users, including businesses and approximately 100 million American households.

Many are in fact ready to pay a bit more to rehabilitate our nation's water infrastructure. The recent ITT Value of Water survey found two-thirds of respondents said they were willing to pay more each month to upgrade our water systems. Extrapolating from the results of the survey, an additional \$5.4 billion per year could be made available nationally to maintain our public water systems.

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Investing in our systems will also be a boost the economy and will create jobs for an undertaking that is essential for the future of the country - jobs that will be produced right here at home and which cannot be outsourced.

Solving our nation's water woes is a shared responsibility, and because water is a public resource, government must lead. Policymakers at all levels must institute sound water policies that close the funding gap, promote conservation and help educate the public about the true value of water.

The issues of water supply and safety and the soundness of water infrastructure are inextricably linked. On this World Water Day, Californians and the rest of Americans as well should think anew about ensuring long-term, reliable access to clean water by rejuvenating and revitalizing the very backbone of our nation - our water infrastructure.

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- County approves facilit for Natural History Museum
- Rock slide closes Malibu Canyon Road near Pepperdine University
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