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MORE COMES WITH COSTS

Why no water system is built with capacity for fires like Palisades, Eaton

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In the immediate aftermath of the devastating Eaton and Palisades fires, local water agencies have been questioned and criticized about why sufficient water resources may not have been available.

As the general manager of a public water agency, I've tried to succinctly explain the quandary facing water systems.

When I talk to people about the finite capacity of water systems, I ask them to imagine a small coffee shop that sells 200 to 300 cups of drip coffee on an average day and a few days a year might sell 400.

That is how community water systems are designed to operate. The random, but not system-shocking, 400-cup day is similar to what a water system may experience on a day with high customer demand in addition to a few isolated structure fires. Water systems are designed for this scenario, and they perform well.

At that imaginary coffee shop, if one day someone comes in and orders 40,000 cups of coffee, that order simply can't be filled. There aren't enough beans, cups, people to make it, people to serve it. That 40,000-cup order is similar to the demand on water systems during the ground response to the Eaton and Palisades fires.

For that coffee shop to be able to fill an unexpected 40,000-cup order that might happen once every 30 years, the business would need to occupy a much larger space, have dozens of people on staff standing by, maintain idle equipment and keep a huge inventory of coffee on hand, most of which would expire and be thrown away.

People don't like to pay for so much excess capacity; in general, they probably shouldn't. In the coffee shop example, if prices were set to support that vast spare capacity, customers wouldn't go there, and the shop would close.

Public water systems can't close. We provide safe drinking water at your tap, on demand, every minute of every day. If being prepared for the one-out-of-every-10,000-days scenario is what the public demands, that capacity can be built. However, the upfront and ongoing financial investment is larger than any community can tolerate. People would move away — or, here in California, reject the rate increase that would be required.

Our state's Proposition 218, approved by voters in 1996, allows for ratepayers to protest and reject water fee increases they don't want, and the public exercises that power frequently. The average household water bill in California is approximately half the average household cellphone bill. The people have spoken, and they want low water bills.

Building a system that has the capacity for a catastrophe that may occur every 30 years is possible, but I don't believe it's the best use of public and personal resources.

A better return on our community investment most likely will come from hardening our homes through proven tactics that make them less ignitable and through being committed to the maintenance of defensible space to prevent rapid fire spread.

Water will always be needed for firefighting too, but it's not realistic to imagine water systems will ever be equipped to douse fires as intense, and widespread, as the Eaton and Palisades blazes were at their peaks.

Tom Majich is the general manager of California's Kinneloa Irrigation District, a special district public water agency formed in 1953. It is in the burn area of the Eaton fire.