PASADENA – “We have a big problem, and that’s why all of you are here.”

Metropolitan Water District board member Cynthia Kurtz stood at the podium, addressing the increasingly anxious audience.

“Our conversation on this problem, at least in the recent past, has focused on removing turf,” Kurtz continued, gazing around the room. “But I think everyone in this room knows that the problem is much bigger, and the conversation needs to be much bigger, than that.”

The problem, of course, is water, or more specifically, the current shortage of it in California.

Engineers, manufacturers, attorneys, water district managers, state water bureaucrats, and academics gathered at the Pasadena Hilton on Thursday for the first-ever Water Technology and Funding Summit in an attempt to solve it.

The water issues facing California are, by now, well-known: a relentless, four-year drought; dismal snowpack levels in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, a crucial source of water for the lower two-thirds of the state; depleted groundwater supplies due to excessive pumping; a labyrinthine, rigid state water bureaucracy; and, of course, a stubborn lack of rainfall.
“Water is life. It’s essential to everything that we do,” said Michelle Segrest, editor of Pumps and Systems magazine and the day’s first speaker. “Without water we cannot grow food. Without water, we cannot have proper sanitation, or have the power to generate electricity…. We have passion, that’s why we’re here today. So let’s work together to make a difference, and always remember the value of clean water.”

The all-day event featured roughly two-dozen speakers with diverse backgrounds: Dan Crichton, NASA JPL computer scientist and head of the Center for Data Science and Technology, outlined the role that Big Data will play in conservation and sustainability efforts; Jet Propulsion Laboratory’s Stephanie Granger discussed the importance of remote sensing in monitoring groundwater levels; Boykin Witherspoon III, executive director of California State University’s Water Resources and Policy Initiatives, revealed the “best kept water secret in California”: the collection of 23 water-centric CSU institutes with over 250 full-time water faculty and research staff.

Eric Garner, managing partner at Best Best and Krieger and a former Los Angeles Water Lawyer of the Year, described the dangers of “groundwater overdraft,” in which deep underground water wells draw more water than is returned through the earth naturally.

Garner praised the state’s passage of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act for “bringing these basins into management and correcting the overdraft issue.”

“It’s hard to miss the stories in the Central Valley right now, of falling land levels due to subsidence, due to over-pumping,” Garner said. “It’s okay to draw on that reserve account in the drought. In fact, that’s what it’s there for. But it’s not okay to do that if you’re not replenishing it in times of plenty, and that’s what has not been going on.”

Garner also touched on regulations recently approved by the State Water Resources Control Board, under which every city and community in California must reduce water usage to accommodate a 25 percent statewide cut. Garner called the new restrictions a “dramatic change” that would “create big challenges,” but he stressed the importance of innovation in future conservation efforts. While desalination is “still expensive,” the attorney pegged drought-resistant landscaping as a promising area for growth.

The Summit’s organizer, Water Technology Hub co-founder Andrew Yeghnazar, said the water industry needs the same “disruptions” that fueled innovation in other technologies.

Adding that “it is time for this to happen to water,” Yeghnazar said:

We have seen disruptions take place in the worlds of communication, renewable electricity in various forms, concentrated solar power, wind, hydroelectric and ocean-wave power, geothermal, and also in advanced oil and gas exploration and recovery, 3D printing, internet cloud space and storage, the Internet of things, Big Data mining, next generation genomics.

For an issue as politically divisive as California water, the event was surprisingly nonpartisan, though some did criticize the state’s spending priorities.

“I want to congratulate the people in this room,” said former California Republican Party chairman and U.S. Senate candidate Tom Del Beccaro. “You are now a part of the world’s solution, no matter where you’re working on water.”

Del Beccaro, who penned an op-ed on Thursday calling for a “comprehensive solution” to the water crisis, criticized the state’s “conflicting policies,” and said that an additional expected 10 to 15 million people in California would add pressure to the state’s weak infrastructure.

“The discussion can’t be about fining people, because fining people is not a policy. It’s the absence of policy,” he said.

Del Beccaro also ripped the state’s pricey high-speed-rail project: “If you’re from California, please raise your hand if you believe that there is a train crisis in California,” he said. “No one raises their hand when I say that. Of course, there’s a budgeted $70 billion high speed rail in California, which is roughly 15 times the amount that we currently have...
slated to spend on additional water storage with the [Proposition 1] bond."

Frances Spivy-Weber, vice chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, defended the $7 billion bond during the panel on “State Water Perspective.”

“There is more money than is popularly known out there,” Spivy-Weber told attendees, citing a recent $1.6 billion loan to the Sacramento Wastewater Regional Treatment Plant and others she said did not draw money from the bond.

The Board member said that for private companies seeking state water project contracts, it helps to think broadly: “When you can do something that has multiple benefits or multiple applications, you’re much more attractive to a frugal governor like we have today than if you have something that is a one-off or something that can be used in one particular area.”

When the panels broke for lunch, Yeghnazar told Breitbart News that the attendees of the Summit represented the best hope California has in combatting the drought.

“We’re here with friends; you don’t get nervous,” he had said earlier in his introductory remarks. “We’re just here being open and candid with each other.”

Still, with the problems of drought engulfing the state and ideas for solutions in no short supply, Maria Mehranian, chief financial officer of engineering firm Cordoba Corporation, summed it up best: “There is no silver bullet,” Mehranian said, as many of the state’s top water minds nodded in agreement.

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