Boykin Witherspoon III: El Nino won't cure California's long-term water woes

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El Nino could be on the horizon, but California's drought is here to stay. No matter how wet our winter is and how much we conserve in our homes, the real solution to our state's water woes lies in changing the way we manage water.

These fundamental changes don't just come from tightening faucets. They come from education, research, collaborating to develop solutions, and developing a pipeline of water experts prepared to manage scarce resources.

The solution lies in this shared approach. The California State University is helping to facilitate such a statewide comprehensive approach to solving California's water problems.

The CSU system harnessed the collective power of its 250 water experts and created the Water Resources and Policy Initiatives (WRPI). From Humboldt in the north to San Diego in the south, our experts are at CSU campuses scattered throughout every part of California: in rural, agricultural, urban and desert communities. Since 2008, our research has addressed the unique water needs of each. Now, we've turned our attention to the drought.

Our researchers are working to understand how the drought is impacting their communities, and developing solutions to manage our water more efficiently. For example, Fresno State is holding drought survival workshops for landscape irrigation managers. A Cal State-Fullerton project is focusing on how to reduce water use in citrus orchards. Humboldt State is investigating the effects of drought on Northern California's iconic redwoods. These are just a few of the dozens of projects led by WRPI experts.

Because drought is a recurring event in California, we also need a pipeline of water problem-solvers. Not only researchers, but also water managers, engineers and environmental specialists who will work together on solutions.

To empower future water experts, WRPI is also developing academic pathways to ensure the industry has highly trained professionals who have the skills to tackle today's and tomorrow's water challenges. We've successfully launched internship programs with the USDA and EPA that prepare CSU students to enter the workforce ready to develop water solutions for business,
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government and the public.

With our faculty, many of these interns are helping disadvantaged communities in the Central Valley improve technology and management of drinking water. Many people in these rural farming communities have been hardest hit by the drought. Groundwater is disappearing and wells are drying up. We're working to establish a system-wide Disadvantaged Communities Center that will help these communities and residents cope with the water crisis by managing their water more efficiently.

With the support of business, we are also commercializing new ideas in water industries, services, and professions in California. For example, Fresno State's Center for Irrigation Technology has developed new technology that is making irrigation more efficient than ever. We are also partnering with Pasadena's Water Technology Hub with the goal of providing faculty and student-developed technology that can be commercialized to create innovative and sustainable water solutions.

Conservation is important, but it won't fill up our dried up wells. It won't fix our aging infrastructure and stabilize our sinking aquifers. It won't bring relief to our agricultural and rural communities. It won't bring water researchers and innovators together to solve our water problem.

Through the research, education and innovation created by WRPI, the CSU is setting the stage for a statewide solution. Collectively, we can change the way California manages water now and in the future.

Boykin Witherspoon III is executive director of the Water Resources and Policy Initiatives and the director of programs at the Water Resources Institute. He wrote this article for this newspaper.