

California's Water Czar, Part Empathetic Confessor and Part Friendly Scold

Photo



Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of California's Water Resources Control Board, has become the face of the state's crackdown on water abusers. Credit Max Whittaker for The New York Times

SACRAMENTO — Felicia Marcus peered over her desk the other day as the State Water Resources Control Board came to order in a hearing room here, bracing for another day of bad drought news. There would be warnings about die-offs of birds and fish. An anguished farmer describing how he is being forced to fallow fields of crops. An [economic report](#) projecting \$2.7 billion in drought-related losses in 2015.

Even during a break, Ms. Marcus could not catch a break. As she tried to talk up a welcome whisper of good news — that after an “abysmal” March, urban Californians did [a better job](#) of conserving water in April — she found herself in a sobering conversation with a television cameraman, Mike Rhinehart of KCRA-TV, who had come to interview

her. He turned ashen when she informed him that people should “turn off their sprinklers and keep them off even when it gets dry.”

“I just invested all this money in my landscaping,” Mr. Rhinehart said. “I’d hate for it all to collapse and die.”

Graphic

Your Contribution to the California Drought

The average American consumes more than 300 gallons of California water each week by eating food that was produced there.

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When Gov. Jerry Brown chose Ms. Marcus to run this powerful if relatively little known board 27 months ago, it seemed a wonky niche of a job, albeit an important assignment for someone whose career has gone from the East Asian

studies program at Harvard University to public interest law to working as a regional administrator at the Environmental Protection Agency, appointed by President Bill Clinton. She envisioned herself dealing with problems like drafting a [water quality plan](#) for the San Francisco Bay/Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Estuary.



OPEN Graphic

That was then. Three months after Mr. Brown ordered a 25 percent statewide reduction in urban water use, Ms. Marcus, 59, has become the face of California’s crackdown on water abusers. She is a drought celebrity — running the board that is setting the rules for homeowners, municipal water districts, farmers, golf courses and people who just want to know whether it is O.K. to water their roses or top off their pool.

She is the lightning rod one day, and the empathetic enforcer the next. The friendly scold on local news stations, and the subject of a national [interview](#) by Gwen Ifill on the PBS “NewsHour.” Suddenly, everyone is wondering what Ms. Marcus does to cut back her own water use: She does not wait for the water to warm up before dashing into the shower, and her car is caked with grime and grit. And they share with her the intimate details about their water lives.

“I see people, and the first thing they want to tell me, they want to do, is confess their water sins,” Ms. Marcus said in her 25th-floor office here, its shelves brimming with memorabilia like photographs of her with former Vice President Al Gore and her appearance as a kid saying the darnedest things on Art Linkletter’s show. “Oh, my God — I feel sort of bad about it.”

At a casual party one Sunday afternoon, a friend dragged her daughter over to Ms. Marcus. “She was like, ‘Will you tell her to take shorter showers?’ ” she recounted. “I’ve had people text me photos of some woman up the way who was overwatering her lawn. I’ll text back and say: ‘What water district are you in? Call them.’ ”

It has fallen to Ms. Marcus to help manage the competing anxieties of Californians as the vise of regulations tightens — and in the process, presumably, deflect some of the political heat from Mr. Brown as enforcement begins. There will be surprise inspections of farms and penalties on water-wasting homeowners.

“The State Water Resources Board is the very powerful water cop — we’ve never had a time when they were more important,” said Tim Quinn, the executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies. “This is the first time a state regulator has ever imposed statewide requirements on water use, and I won’t kid you: We had some serious disagreements with how they are going about it, and still do.”

Mr. Quinn nonetheless praised Ms. Marcus. “She doesn’t have this imperious regulator attitude,” he said. Mr. Brown, who has had his share of crises during his years in government, can be dour on the subject of the drought. By contrast, Ms. Marcus is hardly a voice of gloom, or a strict school master. “Go outside for a walk, it’s a nice day,” she said recently. She paused before adding, “I hate to say it’s nice out when it’s not raining.”

A few moments later, as she strolled around the streets of Sacramento, Ms. Marcus considered the parade of bad news she had heard that day. “This is the challenge the drought presents us with: a host of choices between terrible outcomes,” she said.

Before her appointment to the Water Resources Control Board in 2012 — she took the

helm the next year — Ms. Marcus’s name was suggested to Mr. Brown by [Mary D. Nichols](#), the head of the California Air Resources Board, who has worked on and off with Mr. Brown for close to 40 years.

“I could pretend that I knew that there was going to be a drought,” Ms. Nichols said. “But I did know that even without the drought, the governor had an ambitious water plan that he wanted to move forward. And the one person I know who is best at bringing the various interests together, and getting them to accept the idea of compromise, was her.”

“I knew the job was an important position,” she said, but “I didn’t think she’d be front-page news every day.”

How to Save Water: The California Way

Drought is not new to California. Indeed most of its residents have been living with it for years, making them experts in conservation. We asked our readers in California how they have adapted to a life with less water. Here are some of their suggestions and tips on how to live with drought.

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Ms. Marcus, who grew up in Los Angeles, now lives with her husband in Emeryville, outside San Francisco, and they do not have a lawn. “I have a plant,” she said. “I live in a loft building. I don’t even have a balcony.”

Paul J. Wenger, the president of the [California Farm Bureau Federation](#), said Ms. Marcus, who has made it a crusade to push

people to replace their lawns with drought-tolerant shrubbery or at least cut back watering to once a week, had made no secret of her views on that ubiquitous symbol of California life.

“She’s absolutely against lawns,” he said. “She talks about this all the time: ‘I better not see another green lawn!’ ”

Ms. Marcus says she focuses on lawns “because that’s where the water is,” but asks that she not be counted as part of the anti-lawn brigade.



“I love the smell of cut grass — it’s sort of like the best smell in the world,” she said. “I even have a cologne that smells like cut grass.”

“But I don’t end up wearing it because everyone these days is chemically sensitive to fragrance,” she said. “Sometimes, I’ll spray it around the house.”

So far, Ms. Marcus — who made her reputation over the years more as a conciliator than as an advocate — has managed to keep peace among the factions that have a long history of animosity in the water wars.

Mel Levine, a commissioner with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and a former member of Congress, noted in particular that Ms. Marcus and the board had worked out a [deal](#) in which farmers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta agreed to cut their water use by 25 percent, a once unthinkable compromise of long-held water claims.

“One of the key conflicts is urban and rural,” Mr. Levine said. “And it’s going to get worse if the drought continues.”

More strikingly, she has kept the peace between environmentalists and agriculture. “She’s been really great for us — she’s an environmentalist through and through,” said [Dan Jacobson](#), the legislative director of Environment California, an advocacy group.

Are things really going to get worse?

“Well, yeah,” Ms. Marcus replied in an almost upbeat voice. “The rainy season is over. We know we are in for an awful summer. Dealing with folks out of work. Communities running out of water. I mean the fish and wildlife outcomes alone are pretty horrendous.”

And if it rains this fall? “Some people will be very angry with us,” she said.

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