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HEADLINE: Senate Leaders Call Water Plan a Major Goal

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BODY:

The Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate said yesterday that creating a "realistic" state water plan will be a key goal for the current two-year legislative session.

"I don't think there's anything more important facing the state of California," said Senate President Pro Tem David Roberti, a Los Angeles Democrat. "In the past, you could have a drought and (later) recoup and restore your water. That's not going to happen one of these days."

"I'm joining with David in urging that we make this a high priority," Senate Republican leader Ken Maddy of Fresno said in a separate interview.

Roberti and Maddy's comments come after a dry December left California facing a fifth year of drought. Winter rainfall so far has been 75 percent below normal, and storage reservoirs are only one-third full.

Agricultural interests, which use 80 percent of the state's water, have been warned of cuts. Urban areas may face rationing.

"We're living with the possibility of constant restraints on the use of water," Roberti said. "The public is going to demand the Legislature take action, so we might as well be ready now."

Politically, Maddy said, this is the perfect year to deal with the problem. "This could be the only year we can address the issue because as soon as it rains, people stop thinking about it."

Maddy, whose district is in the Central Valley, said one reason that water policy is important to him is that "if push comes to shove on water usage, the Central Valley will be the one that will be hurt most severely -- those are my people."

In the past, Roberti has not made water policy a major part of his legislative agenda, but the issue is more important to him now because Los Angeles faces the prospect of severe rationing.

Although legislation has yet to be introduced, Roberti laid out a handful of elements he wants the water plan to include. Among them are greater conservation, particularly by farmers and growers, and cleaning up polluted groundwater.

Maddy said more dams and reservoirs are needed to increase the state's water supply. Roberti said he is "open" to increasing water storage. But he said he does not know "whether it's necessary" to create a Peripheral Canal.

In 1982, voters rejected the idea of the canal, which would have taken water from the Sacramento River -- circumventing the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta -- and shipped it to Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley.

Maddy agreed that the idea of a canal has "no political coinage" but said water flow has to be improved in the delta and levies have to be strengthened.