

NEWS CLIPS

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**Resource Conservation and Public
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Organized by date

WaterFix just got more dangerous

By Eric Wesselman and Robert Wright
LA Times 9/7/2018

There are many reasons to oppose the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water tunnels project, now called the California WaterFix. The Trump administration has added a few more.

The WaterFix is the most controversial and expensive water project in California history. It would install two huge tunnels, at a cost of at least \$20 billion, revamping the way the state diverts water from the Sacramento River and the delta to farms and cities to the south. The earlier “peripheral canal” version of this project was voted down in a statewide referendum by a 2-to-1 margin in 1982.

The size of the tunnels could allow for massive water diversions that would further degrade the already impaired San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary.

WaterFix supporters, including the Metropolitan Water District in Southern California, suggest that federal and state environmental laws, and state water regulations, could provide assurances that such extreme diversions wouldn’t happen. But actions by Congress and the administration dramatically illustrate why there can be no such assurances.

The Trump administration is trying to dictate California’s water policy with zero regard for state’s rights or the Golden State’s iconic rivers, lakes and estuaries. The latest attack is Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke’s late August demand for a federal plan to get around state policies in order to increase water deliveries to irrigation districts south of the delta.

The tunnels would only make such machinations easier. With the technical capacity to carry 15,000 cubic feet of water per second, they could divert the typical summer flow of the entire Sacramento River, California’s largest river. Even much less extreme diversions could mean the death of the delta and the bay estuary.

Congress has simultaneously declared its own war against California state water law and environmental protections. The House of Representatives recently passed legislation that would exempt the proposed tunnels, the federally funded Central Valley Water Project and other state water projects from federal or state judicial review.

Until recently, it was unthinkable that a secretary of the Interior would seek to override the California State Water Resources Control Board in making decisions about allocations and protections of California waters. Until recently, it was unthinkable that Congress would attempt to eliminate judicial review under not only federal, but also California environmental protection laws of the state’s own public works projects.

With climate change fueling more severe and prolonged droughts, pressure for such federal intrusion is likely to grow.

The future may well bring even more extreme efforts to maximize water exports to the powerful and eliminate the ability of the state to protect the public interest.

The construction and operation of the WaterFix tunnels will harm and could destroy the delta and Northern California's water resources. Washington's actions show how meaningless assurances to the contrary are. The only effective way to truly protect the delta is for the next governor to halt the tunnel plan.

Eric Wesselman is executive director and Robert Wright is senior counsel for Friends of the River, a statewide conservation group headquartered in Sacramento.

Water board will have a new member

By [The Acorn Staff](#) | on September 06, 2018
By Ian Bradley



Jay Lewitt

Elections only work when voters have multiple candidates from which to choose, but when the number of office-seekers matches the number of openings, there's no need to cast a ballot.

Such is the case with the Las Virgenes Municipal Water District, which has three seats up for election this November and only three candidates in the running.

Mike McNutt, public affairs and communications manager for the water district, said not having to hold an election will save the district \$50,000.

"That money is basically to pay the County of Los Angeles to manage the election," McNutt said. "That means all the services involved (in an election)—sending out the ballots; making sure the candidates names are on them; counting the ballots; certifying them—that's what it would be used for. The fact that we don't have to do that is great."

Incumbents Lee Renger and Jay Lewitt both filed to run for reelection. Board chair Glen Peterson, 68, announced his retirement in May after serving 30 years on the board. Peterson will be replaced by Lynda Lo-Hill.



Lynda Lo-Hill

Lo-Hill is a Calabasas resident and private math tutor who holds a masters in economics. She said she's attended LVMWD meetings for several years and decided to run for Peterson's seat after he announced his retirement. Because there are only three candidates for three seats she will automatically take Peterson's spot when he retires at the end of the year.

"I think water is one of the most important natural resources that needs to be taken care of for the future. I believe one way I can contribute to my community is to be a steward of that. Water management requires good planning and good conservation,"

Lo-Hill said.

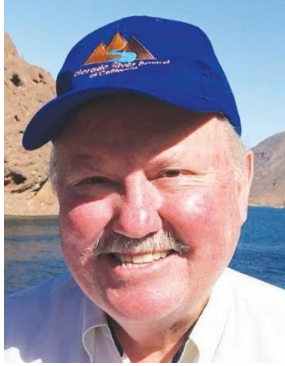
"Water seems like it's so easy, you just turn on your tap and it's there, but when you look at how many miles that water has taken and how many aqueducts that water has taken to get to Calabasas, you realize it's not an easy resource, it's a very precious, difficult resource to get here," she said.



Lee Renger

Renger joined the board in 2005. He's a retired scientist and electrical engineer who worked with NASA. Renger worked at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena and contributed to the Mariner Venus probe. He is credited as the inventor or co-inventor on 22 different patents.

Jay Lewitt was elected to the board in 2014. Lewitt is the founder and president of Every Promotional Product, a promotional products firm based in Agoura Hills, where he lives. Since 2016 Lewitt was nominated to serve a two-year term on the Federal Affairs Committee of the Association of California Water Agencies, which is the leading advocate for California water. He is the district's representative to Congress and other federal agencies that deal with water issues.



Peterson

Rams score as leaders of RAD parade

By The Acorn Staff | on September 06, 2018
By Stephanie Bertholdo



TOUCHDOWN—The City of Agoura Hills selects the Los Angeles Rams team as grand marshal of this year’s Reyes Adobe Days celebration. Above are Agoura Hills City Council members and RAD organizers. Courtesy of Judi Uthus

The parade in the upcoming 14th annual Reyes Adobe Days has taken a detour from its usual celebrity grand marshal pick. Rather than one local celebrity, a whole team has been selected for the post.

This year, the Los Angeles Rams were named as the grand marshal. The team’s corporate headquarters is in Agoura Hills.

The Reyes Adobe Days weekend will take place Oct. 11 to 14. The annual four-day festival celebrates Agoura Hills’ history and culture.

Although the Rams will be out of town that weekend competing in Green Bay, Wis., Nick Newkirk, Agoura Hills recreation supervisor, said there will be no shortage of team representation for Reyes Adobe Days.

“There will be cheerleaders and mascots,” he said, especially during the parade on Sat., Oct. 13.

The L.A. Rams became one of Agoura Hills’ star residents in 2016 when the NFL team returned to Los Angeles from St. Louis, Mo., and opened new headquarters at 29903 Agoura Road in Agoura Hills.

The title sponsor of this year's RAD, Las Virgenes Municipal Water District, will be out in force with informational booths on a variety of water issues and demonstrations that tell the story of water.

The water district's new public affairs and community manager, Mike McNutt, was chosen to kick off the 5K and 10K runs with the blast of the starting pistol.

In addition to celebrating the city's history, the water district will celebrate its 60th anniversary. The district is preparing an anniversary float for the parade, and a mascot, Little Drop, and many employees will also represent LVMWD.

At the Day of the Adobe event on Saturday and Sunday, the district will host a water-wise booth and offer commemorative giveaways and specialty items to people of all ages.

McNutt said October is the official anniversary month for the district.

"I'm excited to partner with the city," he said. "I couldn't think of a better event."

"Selfies" montage

Each year, the city incorporates an art gallery during the festival in the historic Reyes Adobe barn. The gallery features competitions and other art-related activities suitable for every age group.

A new interactive photography exhibit highlighting California culture with a variety of activities will include "selfie stations" throughout the festival where people can capture fun photos. The city will then create a montage of the photographs and share them online and at City Hall.

The Night at the Adobe art reception slated for 6 to 10 p.m. Fri., Oct. 12 is an adult-only event that offers guests a sneak preview of the gallery and a taste of local wine, beer and snacks.

The Las Virgenes water district will provide anniversary cupcakes and entertainment under the stars.

The cost is \$25 per person in advance and \$30 at the door. Admission includes 10 tickets for beer, wine and food tastings.

The Senior Fiesta with a Mexican buffet and music is slated for the day before, Thurs., Oct. 11. Tickets are \$10 per person and reservations are required.

Day at the Adobe

The free family festival at Reyes Adobe Park on Saturday and Sunday will feature new family activities as well as some old favorites. New this year will be pottery and nature-related crafts and rancho-themed activities. The pony rides, train rides, petting zoo, blacksmith and drum circle will return.

Live entertainment includes concerts and cultural performances on Oct. 13 and 14 at the park. The headliner will be The Long Run, an Eagles tribute band, who will perform on Sunday afternoon.

Food and drink will be plentiful at the event. Locally crafted beer and wine will be served in the Farmhouse tent, and food trucks will feature barbecue, tacos, grilled cheese sandwiches and desserts.

Runs, volunteerism

The 10K and 10-mile RAD runs scheduled for 7:15 a.m. Sat., Oct. 13 will have participants running through historic and scenic courses in the Santa Monica Mountains. The races begin at City Hall and will continue past Paramount Ranch and Malibu Creek State Park.

Music and massages, giveaways and post-run pizza are included in the \$40 registration fee. To register and view course runs, visit RADruns.org.

Volunteer opportunities opened this week and will continue through the festival weekend. Sign up at reyesadobedays.org/volunteer.

In addition, there is still time for businesses and organizations to enter a float or participate in the classic car event.

“Reyes Adobe Days celebrates the spirit of community through the generations, from our historic roots to our present-day culture and lifestyle,” Agoura Hills Mayor Bill Koehler said.

For more information and updates on Reyes Adobe Days, runs and events, visit reyesadobedays.org or call Newkirk at (818) 507- 7361.

Repair costs for Oroville Dam exceed \$1 billion

Bill has soared due to design changes and damage that was worse than presumed, state officials say.



CONSTRUCTION CREWS work on the main spillway of the Oroville Dam last October. In February 2017, powerful storms led officials to open the gates to the spillway, which crumbled underneath the massive flows. (Luis Sinco Los Angeles Times)

By Ralph Vartabedian
LA Times 9/06/2018

Fixing the Oroville Dam spillway wrecked by storms in 2017 will cost \$1.1 billion — a \$455-million hike from initial estimates — the state Department of Water Resources announced Wednesday.

The swelling cost can be blamed on design changes that have been made over the last 16 months and damage to the facility near Oroville, Calif., that was far more extensive than initially presumed, the department said.

The Department of Water Resources designed the repairs and issued a contract to Kiewit Corp. in April 2017 based on an estimate that the company could perform the work for \$275 million. But the cost of that portion of the project has shot up to \$630 million. In addition, the department's internal costs have grown by \$100 million, reaching \$310 million. The agency also paid \$160 million in emergency response costs, including removing sediment and installing temporary power lines.

In total, the cost of getting the spillway repaired and upgraded has gone up by about \$1 million every day since April 2017.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is supposed to pay for 75% of the repair costs, leaving the other 25% to agencies in the State Water Project. That would leave customers of water agencies such as the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which serves the city of Los Angeles, on the hook for hundreds of millions of dollars. A Metropolitan Water District

spokesman referred questions about those costs back to the state Department of Water Resources.

The biggest cost of the spillway failure could be legal claims from affected residents and businesses that have been mounting against the Department of Water Resources, seeking billions of dollars in damages allegedly caused by the agency's management of the dam and the near-catastrophe at the facility.

After a series of powerful storms in February 2017 slammed the Feather River watershed, the lake behind the Oroville Dam filled up and forced operators to open the gates to the 3,000-foot-long spillway — sending down more water at freeway speeds than flows on average over Niagara Falls.

The spillway began breaking apart when releases hit 55,000 cubic feet of water per second, a small fraction of its designed capacity. That triggered an evacuation of 188,000 residents living downstream.

An independent investigation found that the 1960s-era spillway had numerous defects, such as thin concrete, poor anchors to the underlying rock and a weak rock base. It allowed the rushing water to lift the concrete sections and scour the underlying foundation. One of the craters left by the water was 80 feet deep.

The report also found that human error contributed to the operational and maintenance problems that preceded the emergency.

The new spillway will have concrete slabs thicker than an airport runway, reinforcement rods and thousands of anchors epoxied at least 15 feet deep into rock — all intended to make it significantly stronger than the original design.

Department of Water Resources spokeswoman Erin Mellon said the Kiewitt contract was issued when only 30% of the design work had been completed, based on unknown geology and unknown amounts of materials that would be needed. The forensic engineering investigation into the causes of the accident was still incomplete, and the repairs had to move at emergency speed to guard public safety, she said.

Mellon said the \$1.1-billion cost is still subject to change, meaning more increases could be coming. The original contract, she said, did not contain a contingency that construction agreements often have to cover unexpected cost increases.

The original spillway cost \$13.7 million when completed in 1968, which would be about \$101 million adjusted for inflation to 2018 dollars. That means the repairs are on pace to cost 10 times more than the construction itself.

Robert Bea, a retired UC Berkeley civil engineer and member of the National Academy of Engineering, said such repairs to a heavy structure can easily surpass the cost of building a new one. Tons of debris had to be removed from the hillside and riverbed, the work had to be performed in stages, and the new spillway will be significantly stronger than the original.

Even after the spillway fixes are completed, the dam's gate structures will remain seriously compromised, posing up to another \$1 billion in repairs, Bea said.

The state also faces billions of dollars in legal claims by residents and businesses who were evacuated.

A lawsuit filed on behalf of 42 individuals, businesses and farms by the law firm of Cotchett, Pitre & McCarthy seeks millions of dollars in damages from mismanagement and defects in the Oroville Dam. The firm has another suit representing the city of Oroville as well as one seeking class-action status, said Eric J. Buescher, an attorney at the firm.

Buescher said downriver property owners have suffered a loss of property value because they are now vulnerable to a dam that has decades of deferred maintenance. "The fact that the state has a \$1-billion repair to the spillway reflects years of deferred maintenance," he said.

Butte County Dist. Atty. Michael Ramsey has filed suit against the state seeking tens of billions of dollars for damage caused by debris that was sent into the Feather River when the spillway broke up.



LETA SINGO LOS ANGELES TIMES

A WORKER drills along the side wall of the Oroville Dam's damaged main spillway in October. The spillway's failure could cost the state billions in legal claims.

Is Trump sweet- talking farmers? Trump pledge to farmers may be just talk

The administration says it's going to send more water to Central Valley agriculture, but it faces many hurdles.



CALIFORNIA'S massive federal irrigation system, the Central Valley Project, must comply with the Endangered Species Act, state environmental regulations and water rights permits. Above, the San Luis Reservoir. (Gary Coronado Los Angeles Times)

By Bettina Boxall
LA TIMES 9/4/2018

With talk of boosting water deliveries to Central Valley agriculture, the Trump administration is telling growers exactly what they want to hear.

But given California's complex water system and a web of federal and state environmental regulations, such promises could prove more political than practical.

An Aug. 17 memo from Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, which directed agencies to give him a plan within 25 days to send more water to Central Valley agriculture, was met with cheers from angry farmers who have for years complained that endangered species protections are cutting their irrigation deliveries and wasting water supplies.

"This gives ... water users hope that there will be a more balanced approach to water supply adequacy and reliability that is sorely needed on our farms and in our rural communities," Frances Mizuno, interim executive director of the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, said in a statement.

But experts say there is little the Interior Department can do on its own to reverse the delivery decline.

"This is more show than anything else," said Holly Doremus, a UC Berkeley law school professor of environmental regulation. "This administration either doesn't know what the

law is or doesn't always care. They will try to do things that they don't have the authority to do."

California's massive federal irrigation system, the Central Valley Project, must comply with U.S. Endangered Species Act requirements and adhere to state environmental regulations and water rights permits.

"You just don't go, 'We're going to change the requirement' " for protecting imperiled fish, said Jerry Meral, a former deputy secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency.

The Interior Department's attempt to do that under President George W. Bush's administration was thwarted by the courts.

Federal and state export operations are also intertwined with the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta — the center of California's sprawling water supply system — to a degree that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the Interior Department to strike out on its own.

Water watchers see a political element in the administration's push for more farm water, which comes before the midterm election and at a time when President Trump's policies on immigration and tariffs are hurting the agricultural sector.

"I would say they're showing they're doing the best they can" for growers dependent on Central Valley Project supplies, Meral said.

Zinke ordered the Bureau of Reclamation, which oversees the Central Valley Project, and other Interior agencies to develop an "initial plan of action" to — among other things — maximize water deliveries, streamline federal environmental reviews of project operations and prepare "legislative and litigation measures" to boost deliveries.

The office of Deputy Interior Secretary David Bernhardt will make final recommendations on the agency's steps this month.

Before his appointment to the department's No. 2 post, Bernhardt was a partner in one of the nation's top-grossing lobbying law firms, Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck. There, he represented the politically influential Westlands Water District, which would be among the chief beneficiaries of improved deliveries to south-of-delta Central Valley Project customers.

Bernhardt promised to recuse himself from matters involving former clients for a year — a period that ended Aug. 2.

"The deputy secretary is no longer recused from participating in particular matters involving specific parties where Westlands Water District is a party," Interior spokeswoman Faith Vander Voort said in an email.

Asked if that meant Bernhardt is involved in preparing the California water plan, she replied, "He is clearly designated in the letter as the lead on executing the plan."

The same day Zinke sent his memo, the reclamation bureau made a potentially more substantive move.

David Murillo, the bureau's regional director, gave notice that his agency wanted to formally start negotiations to revise a long-standing agreement that coordinates state and federal water operations in the delta and the Central Valley.

A review of the 1986 pact has been underway for several years. But federal and state agencies have yet to settle on changes to the agreement, which in some ways favors state operations in the delta.

Because the federal system has significantly more upstream reservoir capacity than the State Water Project, the Central Valley Project under certain conditions must release more fresh water to prevent delta salinity levels from climbing.

If the terms are revised so the state assumes more of the water quality burden, the Central Valley Project could send more water south to Westlands and other irrigation districts.

The reclamation bureau's demand to start negotiations "is a real attempt to gain leverage over the state," said Kate Poole, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group.

But state water contractors, including Southern California agencies, are bound to fight any revisions that hurt their delta deliveries. And the process could drag on for years.

As water exports from the delta increased in recent decades, populations of migrating salmon and delta smelt — a finger-sized fish found only in the delta — plummeted. That has triggered endangered species protections under state and federal laws which periodically limit the intake of the government pumping plants that divert supplies to San Joaquin Valley fields and Southland cities.

State water quality standards also mandate that a certain level of fresh water flow through the delta to keep salt water from the San Francisco Bay away from the delta pumps.

In tweets this summer, Trump echoed farmers' protests that water flowing to the sea is wasted. In one tweet that was quickly condemned by state officials, Trump incorrectly claimed water "diverted into the Pacific Ocean" was hampering efforts to fight Northern California wildfires.

Any attempts by the Trump administration to skirt state environmental regulations could run afoul of a 1978 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in a case that pitted California against the Central Valley Project.

The high court found that under the 1902 Reclamation Act, federal irrigation projects in the West must conform to state laws.

Undermining that “is a huge third rail which will cause a lot of Western states to rise up,” Poole said.

The Trump administration “seems to be sending us to more chaos and litigation,” she added.



INTERIOR Secretary Ryan Zinke has demanded a plan to send more water to Central Valley farmers. (Rick Bowmer Associated Press)

SACRAMENTO WATCH

Water project bill fails to advance

Senate panel shelves measure that would have subjected Cadiz plans to more scrutiny.



THE PROJECT by Scott Slater's company, Cadiz Inc., would pump Mojave Desert groundwater and sell it to Southland communities. (Al Seib Los Angeles Times)

MELANIE MASON
LA TIMES 9/03/2018

SACRAMENTO — A last-ditch effort to impose additional environmental review on a controversial groundwater pumping project in the Mojave Desert sputtered Friday night after a key state Senate committee held the bill over concerns about legislative process.

The measure, Senate Bill 120, would have given the state Lands Commission and Department of Fish and Wildlife the authority to study the project by Cadiz Inc. to make sure the pumping would not harm surrounding lands.

A similar measure was shelved by the Senate last year. Sen. Richard Roth (D-Riverside) revived the proposal in recent days using a legislative maneuver called a gut-and-amend, or inserting a new policy into an existing, unrelated bill.

"We hit that pause button in order to make sure we get the science right," Roth said in the Senate Appropriations Committee on Friday.

"If Cadiz has it wrong, if we get it wrong, who is going to accept responsibility for this?" he added. "We can't afford to get it wrong."

Roth's bill had several high-profile backers, including U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom. But Cadiz strongly opposed the measure, arguing the project has

already been scrutinized under the California Environmental Quality Act and won several lawsuits against it.

Labor groups also opposed the bill, arguing it would squelch jobs.

“What are we telling investors in projects, that they can invest 20 years of time, tens of millions of dollars of pre-construction costs and go through the entire process and meet everything that this Legislature has set before them to just have the rug ripped out from underneath them and threaten 6,000 jobs in one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in the state of California?” said Scott Wetch, lobbyist for the California State Pipe Trades Council.

The measure cleared the Assembly last week, but prospects looked shakier in the Senate, where the attempt to impede the Cadiz project had previously faltered in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

Sen. Anthony Portantino (D-La Cañada Flintridge), chairman of the committee, said he objected to how SB 120 was resurrected, which he said would have undermined the decision of the panel’s prior chair.

“I actually support where you’re trying to do in the bill,” Portantino said. “But I have to stand up for the integrity of the House. I have to stand up for how we do what we do.”

Cadiz cheered the outcome.

“SB 120 was an attempt by its proponents at the 11th hour of session to change the rules of the game for Cadiz, but the bill also risked so much more — water reliability, jobs and the integrity of California’s environmental laws,” spokeswoman Courtney Degener said. “We are proud to have been a part of a wide coalition of more than 70 organizations that quickly opposed SB 120 and appreciative of the respect for the legislative process expressed by the Senate tonight.”

Environmental groups blasted the move, with one pinning the blame on Senate leader Toni Atkins (D-San Diego).

“Senate leadership let down the people of California tonight by not allowing a final vote on SB 120,” David Lamfrom, California Desert director for the National Parks Conservation Assn., said in a statement. “All eyes were on Sen. Toni Atkins and leadership following the assembly passage of a common-sense bill to ensure science was incorporated into an industrial, desert water mining project. Blocking a final vote on SB 120 furthers Trump administration actions to remove required federal review of the Cadiz project.”

In a statement after the hearing, Roth indicated he would continue to press the issue next year.

“The facts speak for themselves, and will be discussed again by myself and my colleagues,” Roth said. “The science of the Cadiz Water Project is based on a flawed

process led by a self-interested agency. The discrepancies between numbers from the U.S. Geological Survey and Cadiz Inc. are alarming at best and dangerous at worst — imperiling an entire ecosystem. I am steadfast in my resolve and the conversation will continue.”

Detroit turns off taps in schools

Rolls out water coolers amid concerns for lead

David Eggert and Corey Williams ASSOCIATED PRESS
Ventura County Star 9/04/2018

DETROIT – Some 50,000 Detroit public school students will start the school year Tuesday by drinking water from coolers, not fountains, after the discovery of elevated levels of lead or copper – the latest setback in a state already dealing with the consequences of contaminated tap water in Flint and other communities.

Detroit Public Schools Superintendent Nikolai Vitti expects the closure of water fountains and other drinking fixtures in all 106 schools to go smoothly because the district – Michigan’s largest – had previously turned off the tap in 18 schools. The coolers and bottled water will cost \$200,000 over two months, after which the district probably will seek bids for a longer-term contract, he said.

Kids at the schools that already had coolers drank more than they ever had from the fountains, according to their principals.

“There has been an undertone of not trusting the water to begin with,” Vitti told The Associated Press in a phone interview Friday, days after announcing his decision. “With the water coming from the water coolers, they just trust it more and are drinking it more.”

Detroit is not the first major school district to switch to bottled water. The 49,000-student district in Portland, Oregon, turned off its fixtures in 2016 after a scandal over high levels of lead in the water at almost every school – a problem that took two years to fix. Fountains at most schools in the 80,000-student Baltimore districts have been shut off for more than a decade .

Last year, LeeAndria Hardison saw brown water coming from fountains at the Detroit school attended by her teenage son.

“I’ve been sending water to school every day with his name on it – five bottles of water in a cooling pack,” said Hardison, 39. “He was only allowed to drink that water.”

Water testing in Detroit schools should have started years ago because of aging pipes, said Ricky Rice, 61, who has a grandson in sixth grade and another grandchild beginning kindergarten.

“In the poorer neighborhoods, in the black neighborhoods, we always have a problem with issues of environment,” Rice said. “Look at the water up in Flint. Now, look at the water here. They should have known it was going to be a problem with this old infrastructure.”

Detroit’s move is being welcomed by experts and state lawmakers who say such voluntary testing should be mandated in school districts nationwide, only 43 percent of which tested for lead in 2016 or 2017, according to the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

“Somebody’s finally checking to see if the water’s OK and doing something about it,” said Thomas Lyon, a University of Michigan professor who studies water-quality issues.

While water utilities are required to check for lead, they focus on a sample of homes, which does not guarantee that all individual residences or buildings are lead-free. The entities that provide and distribute Detroit’s drinking water – the Great Lakes Water Authority and the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department – said that it meets and surpasses federal and state standards and that the district’s problems are due to aging plumbing.

Vitti, who took over in Detroit in 2017 after the district had been under state management for years, said it is “preposterous” that schools are not forced to test for lead, and Detroit’s problems are reflective of inequities in urban America and a lack of spending on infrastructure.

“You can test the water coming into a building,” he said. “But if you’re not testing every water source – water fountains, sinks in bathrooms, kitchens – then you’re assuming that the plumbing linked to that particular water source is not producing elevated levels of copper or lead.”

Vitti ordered the testing of every water outlet in each school building last spring. It was a more expansive sampling than was conducted in 2016 – testing that came in the wake of the crisis in Flint, where the water source was switched under state management and not treated to prevent corrosion, enabling lead to leach from aging service lines and household fixtures.

Water-quality issues have been identified at some water outlets in 34 Detroit schools. Test results are pending for other schools.

Vitti said he is in no rush to turn the tap back on, and a long-term solution must first be identified.

Only eight states require lead-in-water testing in schools, and Michigan is not among them. Republican Gov. Rick Snyder first proposed mandated testing in 2016 as part of broader changes outlined in the wake of the Flint crisis, for which his administration was primarily blamed. Democratic-backed bills have not advanced in the GOP-led Legislature, but a hearing held in June indicates they could come up again.

Rep. Stephanie Chang, a Detroit Democrat, said the inaction is disappointing given the serious health consequences of being exposed to lead.

“It only makes sense to test water on a regular basis in our schools and in child care centers and in other places where there are vulnerable populations,” she said.



Detroit's not the first major school district to go to bottled water. The 49,000 student district in Portland, Ore., turned off fixtures in 2016 after a lead scandal. BETH NAKAMURA/THE OREGONIAN VIA AP



Marcus Garvey Academy is among Detroit schools where elevated levels of lead or copper were detected in the most recent round of water testing. ROGER SCHNEIDER/AP

“There has been an undertone of not trusting the water to begin with. With the water coming from the water coolers, they just trust it more and are drinking it more.”

Nikolai Vitti

Detroit Public Schools superintendent

IN BRIEF

Water levels continue to drop at Lake Mead, Lake Powell

PHOENIX – Scientists say water levels at Lake Mead and Lake Powell are dropping to dangerous levels, reflecting the Colorado River’s worsening “structural deficit.”

The Arizona Republic reports scientists from the Colorado River Research Group say Lake Powell has declined because of extra water releases flowing into Lake Mead.

Doug Kenney, the group’s chair and a professor at the University of Colorado, says Lake Powell is being drained to maintain Lake Mead. Lake Powell sits at about 48 percent full, and Lake Mead is about 38 percent full. Powell’s levels are projected to fall 94 feet by the end of the year below where the reservoir stood in 2000, when it was nearly full.

The Colorado River and its tributaries provide water for about 40 million people.

— *Associated Press*

Ventura County Star 9/04/2018