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Resistance slows water fee proposal

Ventura plan would target development

By Claudia Boyd-Barrett
Special to The Star
Ventura County Star 6/19/2014

A plan by the city of Ventura to charge developers a fee to help bolster future water supplies trickled to a halt this week after the City Council decided to create a citizens task force to study the issue.

The council voted 6-0 to request that city staff members come up with plans for the task force after a threehour hearing Monday at which residents and developers spoke out against the proposed ordinance and called for more involvement in decision-making. Council member Christy Weir was absent for the vote.

The proposal, put forward by the city's water department, would levy a one-time fee of \$10,686 to \$15,538 per acre-foot of estimated per year water use on new or intensified development, depending on its location. Developers who supply their own water would not have to pay the fee.

The money would go into a special fund and be used for acquiring new water rights or developing infrastructure to increase water supply to the city.

Although Ventura has enough water to meet its needs, droughts and demand from increased development could cause supplies to run short in the future, Ventura Water General Manager Shana Epstein told the council. She said the proposed fees on new development would alleviate some pressure on ratepayers to fund infrastructure to meet the growing demand for water.

"We're trying to get ahead of the curve," she told the council.

More than 20 residents and business representatives spoke out against the proposal. Although their complaints varied, almost all called for a residents committee to study the city's water challenges and the potential effect of the fees, with many offering to serve on the committee.

Some residents called for a moratorium on new development, arguing that the fees would be insufficient to keep Ventura's water supplies sustainable.

Diane Underhill likened the city's water situation to "a slow-moving train wreck." She expressed doubt that investing in more infrastructure would guarantee enough water for the city as it grows.

"Money is not water. You cannot drink an inlieu fee," she said. "We cannot allow new

development to push us beyond our water supply.”

Laura Gulovsen, a Ventura resident since 1949, doubted the fees would be enough to cover the city’s water needs over the long term. She said the city should halt development altogether.

“I don’t think we should be handing out any more permits until we can identify new sources of water,” she said. “Let’s make sure that Ventura is sustainable for us who live there already.”

Other speakers questioned how the fees were calculated and how they would be spent, with several business owners calling them too high or unfair. They also said two city-led public workshops on the matter did not provide participants enough opportunity to give input.

John Hofer, managing partner with Hofer Enterprises, which owns the Ventura Auto Center, said the proposed fees could devastate long-standing plans to expand the center and attract new dealers and retailers.

“It could be a complete deal killer,” he said. “It’s hard to even fathom this kind of expense.”

Players Casino CEO Bill Kracht said the fees could affect his expansion plans and said he wished he had known about the proposed plan earlier.

The council peppered Ventura Water staff members with questions about the ordinance, including its potential effects on development, jobs and the price of housing. Deputy Mayor Erik Nasarenko asked whether the city could take action to ensure that landowners hand over water rights to the city before development. Epstein said enforcing that would be hard.

The council directed city staff members to return with recommendations on setting up the task force and defining its scope.

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Council weighs water options

City to look underground for supplies

By Teresa Rochester
Ventura County Star 6/19/2014

It might not be oil, but the groundwater beneath Thousand Oaks might be as good as gold in these water-challenged times.

The City Council decided at its meeting last week the possibility was worth investigating.

The council unanimously approved a \$355,000 contract with Los Angeles-based CDM Smith Inc. to study potential groundwater sources in the Conejo Valley, along with their quantity, quality, potential locations and treatment options.

A contingency fee of \$35,000 was approved as part of the 5-0 vote.

"The time is now for us as a local agency to look at alternative options," public works director Jay Spurgin told the council. "The basin is full. We see it seeping out in parts of the city. ... Clearly, that is a resource we need to look at."

Using groundwater would bring the city full circle, Spurgin said. Groundwater was Thousand Oaks' sole source until the late 1960s.

The study, which is expected to take 12 months to conduct, will address that issue, along with the feasibility of local water supply options that include reclaimed water, stormwater capture and other sources.

The study also will look at desalting groundwater, potable and nonpotable.

Councilman Al Adam said the city was being farsighted in looking for ways to lessen its dependence on imported water.

Earlier in the evening, the council said goodbye to veteran Thousand Oaks Planning Commission member Mic Farris, who is moving with his family to New York.

The physicist and father of one has served on the planning panel three times. He most recently was appointed in 2011.

Farris also made three unsuccessful bids for a seat on the council.

Farris in 2012 launched the Right to Vote initiative in response to an appointment to fill an unexpected vacancy on the council.

The initiative called for having an election to fill any unplanned vacancy on the council.

After the measure qualified for the ballot, the council adopted it as an ordinance.

At the meeting, he was presented with a plaque from his fellow commissioners for his service. Mayor Andy Fox and county Supervisor Linda Parks presented Farris with commendations.

"I've really appreciated all that you have given to the city," longtime Planning Commissioner Daryl Reynolds said.

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Across the state

SAN FRANCISCO

Court backs state on farms' water limits

The First District Court of Appeal ruled the state can limit how much water hundreds of farmers pump from a Northern California river to protect their vineyards from frost.

The state's Water Resources Control Board set the rules after 25,000 young salmon died on the Russian River and its tributaries in 2008. The state said farmers in Mendocino and Sonoma counties sprayed so much water onto their vineyards and other crops during cold snaps that river levels dropped, killing fish.

A Mendocino County judge had blocked the state's regulation, saying farmers had long-standing river rights, but the First District Court of Appeal finds the water board has authority to implement its plans.

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Brown's tunnel plan looms over effort to pass water bonds

George Skelton

LOS ANGELES TIMES 6/18/2014



Most any Californian who relies on clean tap water, has a lawn, washes a car, enjoys fresh produce and savors salmon has a stake in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. (Wally Skali / Los Angeles Times)

The fight for the ages is over Brown's plan to dig two tunnels to siphon Sacramento River water to the south

Every water bond proposal includes money for delta ecological restoration

As lawmakers struggle to craft a water bond proposal for voters, there's a huge reservoir of wonderful, non-controversial project ideas. But practically everyone is suffering from tunnel vision. Literally.

Not just the politicians, but — especially — the warring water interests.

The overriding question for most is what effect any bond would have on Gov. Jerry Brown's highly controversial, very costly plan to bore two gigantic water tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

Would it help or hurt the \$26-billion project? Expedite it or slow it down?

And, like most political issues, where you stand depends on where you sit. If you sit in the delta or thereabouts, you're opposed to other regions grabbing more of your fresh water. If you sit to the south, especially in the parched San Joaquin Valley, you're thirsty for other people's water.

Tunnels are where we leave the area of non-controversy and move into a north-south war.- Sen. Lois Wolk (D-Davis)

The delta is a source of drinking water for 24 million people and irrigation for 3 million acres. Most any Californian who relies on clean tap water, has a lawn, washes a car, enjoys fresh produce and savors salmon has a stake in the delta.

The monumental fight for the ages is over the governor's plan to dig two 40-foot wide, 35-mile long tunnels to siphon fresh Sacramento River water downstream from the state capital and funnel it into south-bound aqueducts.

San Joaquin farmers and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California are desperate for a more reliable stream from the north. Federal and state exports of delta water have been stymied in recent years by court decisions protecting endangered fish, including chinook salmon. Hence the twin-tunnels, which would be paid for by increased water rates.

Delta farmers — aligned with environmentalists and many northerners — contend the tunnels would leave them defenseless against crop-killing salt water from San Francisco Bay. Not to mention muck up a bucolic paradise.

But wait! There are many other smaller, non-controversial projects all over California that could help local regions survive droughts and global warming.

Projects like purifying drinking water, capturing storm water, recharging aquifers, recycling, desalination and watershed restoration. Also, shoring up delta levees. And, although there's some controversy, the project list includes building reservoirs.

That's the sort of stuff a state bond issue could help finance.

But there's a hitch. Every bond proposal also includes money for delta ecological restoration. Fish habitat is in dire need of a fix. And it's necessary before federal and state wildlife agencies will permit the tunnels to be built.

Tunnel backers insist the bond money pay for restoration that will help expedite the permitting. And they don't trust a bond proposal supported by delta interests. That measure, SB 848 by Sen. Lois Wolk (D-Davis), would empower a state commission called the Delta Conservancy — whose mission is like it sounds — to allocate the restoration money.

Tunnel supporters demand that the Brown administration choose the restoration projects. And tunnel opponents don't trust that notion at all. They want to keep the whole tunnel turmoil out of the bond discussion. But that's probably impossible.

"We want a bond with no controversy — one that doesn't harm any part of the state," Wolk says. "Tunnels are where we leave the area of non-controversy and move into a north-south war. There's no reason to fight over the tunnels today. We can fight over them next year or for the next 30 years.

"Everyone acknowledges there are tremendous needs statewide. In a north-south war, we all lose."

Wolk's bill seems to have broad Senate support. President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) and his replacement-elect, Sen. Kevin de León (D-Los Angeles), are coauthors.

The Wolk bond is "tunnel neutral," Steinberg claims, adding that "the Achilles for any bond is a north-south water war."

But Jeff Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District, contends that Wolk's proposal is "anti-export of water, period. And as a water exporter, we're not going to support it."

Wolk's bond could have another problem: Its size — \$10.5 billion.

In 2009, the Legislature placed an \$11.1-billion bond on the 2010 ballot, but later took it off because the proposal was so bloated and saturated with pork. Lawmakers also removed it from the 2012 ballot. Now, it's on this November's ballot. All polling shows it would be rejected by voters.

The ballot measure could be shelved again on a simple majority legislative vote plus the governor's signature. But a two-thirds vote would be required to substitute a new bond.

If there ever was an opportune time to seek voter approval for a water bond, it's seemingly now. The economy is recovering and we're in the midst of a historic drought. People are being asked not to water their lawns. Farm fields are being fallowed.

But Wolk's price sticker is raising eyebrows.

Assemblyman Anthony Rendon (D-Lakewood), chairman of the water committee, is offering a more digestible \$8-billion bond.

"It definitely has to be under \$10 billion," Rendon says. "To voters, a lot of these bond issues seem like a run on the store. I'm concerned about debt. We really need to be responsible."

Rendon said his bond "is silent on the tunnels."

Another bond proposal, by Assemblyman Henry T. Perea (D-Fresno), is supported by tunnel backers. Its price tag: \$10.2 billion-plus.

Nobody knows exactly where the governor stands because he hasn't engaged. In fact, for a long time Brown didn't even want a bond on the ballot while he was seeking reelection. But apparently he has acquiesced.

"No bond will succeed without the governor," Wolk says. "People adore him and respect him and listen to him."

Brown had better talk fast. The Legislature wants to wrap this up before it goes on vacation July 3.

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Op-Ed

'Chinatown' in real life: In L.A., you have to follow the water



Mayor Eric Garcetti is seen applauding as water flows down the 100-year-old Los Angeles Aqueduct Cascades during celebrations last November marking the 100th anniversary of the aqueduct's opening. (Los Angeles Times)

GARY POLAKOVIC
LA TIMES 6/17/2014

It's been 40 years since the June 20, 1974, opening of "Chinatown," the fictionalized drama about power, corruption and what is arguably L.A.'s most crucial resource: water. The iconic film was Hollywood's make-believe version of an undying reality: In L.A., you have to follow the water.

Water in the West has been something of a fantasy since the first wagon trains. It's a drink mixed from equal parts Manifest Destiny, hubris and engineering derring-do. Aspiration would find a way to trump aridity; water would inevitably flow to our will, not nature's. Now the make-believe at the heart of Western water is withering, as the reality of drought and global warming take hold.

Water purveyors have so successfully fulfilled their mission statements to provide abundant, reliable and inexpensive water for all that scarcity hardly seems real.-

The myths began in the late 19th century when land speculators, civic boosters and scientists proclaimed settlement and agriculture would create cloudbursts over dry land, transforming desert to garden. The notion that "rain follows the plow" was soon discredited, but not until it helped populate the Great Plains in particular and the West in general with promises of abundant water.

Illusion continued into the 1920s, when the water of the Colorado River was allocated among seven Western states, including California, all sharing 16.4 million acre-feet annually. Except the assumption was wrong; there wasn't that much water in the river. In fact, the average annual flow has proved to be about two-thirds of what the compact allocated, rendering the Colorado the most oversubscribed river in the world.

Today, water fantasies continue. California developers, real estate agents and homeowners prefer grassy turf with curb appeal: big, soggy green sponges that along with other thirsty landscaping account for up to 60% of a household's water use. In the irrigated Coachella Valley in the Colorado Desert, one grassy golf course follows the next. The whole thirsty state has about 900 golf courses, second only to Florida. Central Valley farmers want freedom to grow cash crops, including water-intensive alfalfa, cotton and rice, on arid land. Agriculture uses about 75% of California's developed water resources.

These fantasies cut across party lines. Republicans and their agriculture allies want more dams and infrastructure. Yet, with more than 75,000 dams installed across the United States already, including about 1,400 in California, plus hundreds of miles of what's called conveyance — aqueducts, pumps and canals — we have yet to build a solution that will work long term. Democrats want more conservation, but what's the inducement to conserve? Water is so cheap that there's little incentive to save it.

Residential customers are paying about half a cent per gallon for first-tier water in the city of Los Angeles. At the Metropolitan Water District, the wholesaler that provides about 60% of Southern California's water, the top-tier rate for a gallon is about one-third of a penny. What other commodity is seemingly as worthless as water?

Throughout the state, water purveyors have so successfully fulfilled their mission statements to provide abundant, reliable and inexpensive water for all that scarcity hardly seems real because water is nearly untethered from the economics of supply and demand. It's true that Angelenos have proved to be responsible water conservers, but it's still a tall order to persuade people to treat water as the precious resource it is.

California's history of water mirages, along with north-south water wars and the cynicism engendered by the kind of water politics portrayed in "Chinatown," help explain the skepticism that has greeted statewide water proposals in recent decades.

Consider the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, a proposed \$25-billion project aimed at improving the San Joaquin -Sacramento River Delta ecosystem and safeguarding water supplies for Central and Southern California. It calls for building two 40-foot diameter

tunnels 35 miles long to divert part of the Sacramento River. The Legislature has twice postponed water bond votes to pay for such infrastructure fixes, fearing the bonds would fail. It's uncertain whether lawmakers will try to place the latest version on the November ballot.

As the fight over a delta conveyance stretches on, very little else is being done statewide to address California's underlying water problem. The state has experienced below-normal rainfall in all but a few years since an El Niño soaker in 1997-98. Severe drought grips the state, big reservoirs across the West sport high-and-dry bathtub rings, some San Joaquin Valley farmland lies fallow and a few cities face steep water cuts or rationing.

Worse, scientists know that California and the Southwest have experienced megadroughts, lasting for decades. Today, no one has a plan should such droughts recur. And yet recur they almost certainly will. UCLA researchers found that such "perfect droughts" coincide with periods of warming temperatures. And the climate models and data point to one consistent conclusion: The Southwest will be much warmer and drier in the near future. State officials expect the Sierra snowpack to diminish by 25% in 35 years.

Unless we stop playing make-believe, the words of the fictional L.A. politician in the opening scene of "Chinatown" will prove prescient: "We live next door to the ocean, but we also live on the edge of a desert. Los Angeles is a desert community; beneath this building, beneath every street there's a desert, and without water, the dust will rise up and cover us as if this place never existed."

Gary Polakovic, a former Times editor and environmental staff writer, is president of Make Over Earth Inc., a communications and public affairs firm that specializes in environmental and energy policy.

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Drought is a drain on California lake, reservoir tourism



At Castaic Lake north of Santa Clarita, a Father's Day fishing tournament was moved because the lake is too shallow to launch boats. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

HUGO MARTÍN

LA TIMES 6/17/2014

Economy, Business and Finance Waterway and Maritime Transportation Droughts and Heat Waves Restaurant and Catering Industry Lifestyle and Leisure Recreational and Sporting Goods Industry California Drought (2014)

Drought is disrupting a variety of activities that help make up the state's outdoor recreation industry

At recreation sites that remain open despite low water levels, anglers are finding disappointing conditions

Jared Rhodes spent the last four summers leading white-water rafting trips in the Sierra mountains.

During the off-season, the 34-year-old picked up jobs at bike shops and restaurants to tide him over until the winter snow melted.

"I have a real passion for the outdoors," Rhodes said. "I want to find a way to do it full time."

That's gotten tougher with California suffering a punishing drought. The rafting company that had employed him, Kern River Outfitters in Wofford Heights, has shut down for the season because of low water levels.

Falling water levels

The long drought is affecting many state recreational lakes.

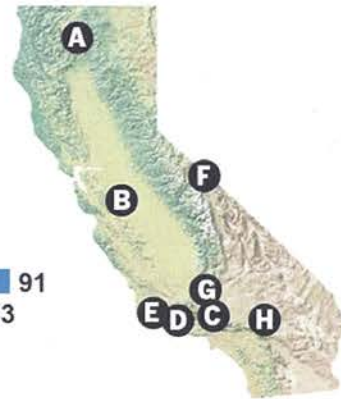
Below, a sampling of popular California sites.

Percentage of capacity*

A. Shasta Lake	45%
B. San Luis Reservoir	37
C. Castaic Lake	55
D. Lake Casitas	57
E. Lake Cachuma	35
F. Crowley Lake	58
G. Pyramid Lake	91
H. Big Bear Lake	83

* As of June 13

Source: State Department of Water Resources,
individual lake officials



Javier Zarracina / @latimesgraphics

The drought is disrupting a variety of summer activities that help make up the state's \$85-billion outdoor recreation industry, the nation's largest. Experts say it will deal a severe blow to rural communities that rely heavily on skiing, fishing and camping.

"In these small places, outdoor recreation becomes the economic engine," said David Roloff, a professor of recreation and parks management at Cal State Sacramento. "The impact can be felt much more on a local level."

The drought already has done away with seasonal jobs and long-established events throughout the state.

A swimming lagoon at Castaic Lake north of Santa Clarita that draws 160,000 visitors a year has been closed. A Father's Day fishing tournament was moved because the lake is too shallow to launch boats. A yachting race that attracts as many as 300 boats to a popular Sierra Nevada lake has been canceled for the first time in 60 years.

"It's never been this bad," said Nancy Omachi, owner of the Huntington Lake Resort.

Omachi operates a restaurant, marina and nine rental cabins along the nearly five-mile lake. The water level has dropped to about a third of capacity, discouraging sailors, anglers and campers.

Business is down about 30%, Omachi said, forcing her to reduce her staff to seven workers from 12. She is thinking about closing the steakhouse restaurant on Sundays and operating only Fridays and Saturdays.

To compensate for the loss of boaters, Omachi is promoting a "monster kite" festival in August.

In these small places, outdoor recreation becomes the economic engine. The impact can be felt much more on a local level.- David Rolloff, a professor of recreation and parks management at Cal State Sacramento

"We've got a lot of beach now," she said of the lake.

The low water levels come after the meager snowfall last winter that forced ski resorts statewide to close weeks early. The number of ski visits shrank to 4.9 million from the five-year average of 6.8 million, according to the California Ski Industry Assn.

Even Mammoth Mountain, which boasts the state's highest elevation, reported 10% fewer skiers and snowboarders than the 2011-12 season. In Southern California's San Bernardino Mountains, resorts at Bear Mountain and Snow Summit reported a combined drop in skiers of about 20% from the previous season.

Conditions were so bad that Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency in January as water levels in state reservoirs sank. Now, water levels are so low that state officials closed off sections of nearly 20 rivers to sport fishing this spring, and have hinted that other rivers may be shut this fall.

At those that remain open, anglers are finding disappointing conditions. Fly fisherman Lowell Ashbaugh went fishing on the lower Sacramento River in February and said he had to venture farther up river to find enough flowing water to fish.

"The river was the lowest I've ever seen it," Ashbaugh said. "I had to fish places I've never fished before."

On the Kern River, at the eastern edge of the Sierra Nevada, the white-water rafting season typically runs from May to September.



Clayton Cook, left, watches fellow White Water Prospectors pan for gold last month in the Kern River. The river's low level has enabled prospecting in areas not searched before. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

But this year, Kern River Outfitters canceled the entire season for the first time since it began operating in 1981. The company usually employs about 25 guides who lead 4,000 to 5,000 visitors each season.

"We looked at snow depth levels and runoff and just decided there wasn't enough water," said Bob Volpert, chief executive of Kern River Outfitters.

In the Sierra mountains east of Fresno, Huntington Lake has for decades been a popular destination for campers, boaters and anglers. But the drought has shrunk the sky-blue lake to about one-third its former size, leaving most boat docks resting on dry shores.

The conditions forced the Fresno Yacht Club to cancel its annual regatta for the first time in the club's 60-year history. The regatta, scheduled for two weekends in July, was expected to draw 150 boats each weekend.

It is one of several boat races that have been canceled for the lake, drying up commerce for grocery stores, restaurants and other businesses, said Daniel Irwin, commodore for the club.

"It's a lot of money not going into that particular community," Irwin said.

In the mountains around Big Bear Lake, local officials have been promoting other outdoor activities to compensate for the low ski visitor turnout. Snow Summit plans to open two high-speed quad lifts this summer for mountain bikers.

"Mountain biking has taken off to another level," said Dan McKernan, a spokesman for the Big Bear Lake Resort Assn. "But it won't make up for the low ski numbers. Snow is our bread and butter."

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State keeps on truckin' salmon to sea

Migration too dangerous as drought lingers

By Terence Chea Associated Press
Ventura County Star 6/16/2014



Brian rodman uses a screen to heard young Chinook salmon down a holding tank to be piped into a tanker truck in early May at the California department of Fish and Game's Nimbus Fish Hatchery in rancho Cordova.
Associated Press Photos

MAREISLAND— In drought stricken California, young Chinook salmon are hitting the road, not the river, to get to the Pacific Ocean. Millions of 6-monthold smolts are hitching rides in tanker trucks because California's historic drought has depleted rivers and streams, making the annual migration to the ocean too dangerous for juvenile salmon.

"The drought conditions have caused lower flows in the rivers, warmer water temperatures, and the fish that would normally be swimming down the rivers would be very susceptible to predation and thermal stress," said Kari Burr, fishery biologist with the Fishery Foundation of California.

California has been trucking hatchery-raised salmon for years to bypass river dams and giant pumps that funnel water to Southern California and Central Valley farms.

But this year state and federal wildlife agencies are trucking nearly 27 million smolts, about 50 percent more than normal, because of the drought, according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Each spring, the Coleman National Fish Hatchery usually releases about 12 million smolts into Battle Creek, a tributary of the Sacramento River near Redding. But this year, it trucked 7.5 million of them to San Francisco Bay because the drought had made the 300-mile swim too perilous.

On a recent morning a small convoy of tanker trucks carrying Coleman hatchery fish pulled up to the docks of Mare Island north of San Francisco Bay. There the trucks

unloaded 750,000 smolts that gushed out of long plastic pipes into floating netted pens.

The silvery smolts, just inches long, acclimated to the water in the net pens before Fishery Foundation boats took them out to the bay, where the fish were released and pulled to the ocean by tides.

Trucking the smolts ensures that a large number will survive and grow to be the California king salmon prized by fishermen and seafood lovers. But skipping the river journey means the migratory fish won't know how to swimhome to spawn in three years.

"Because that imprinting cycle is broken, it's unlikely that many fish will make it back to Coleman. In other words, they stray. They won't find that scent to where home is," said Scott Hamelberg, who manages the Coleman National Fish Hatchery.

The federal hatchery in Shasta County did release 4.5 million smolts into Battle Creek in April after rain temporarily improved river flows. Hamelberg hopes at least a small number of them will return in a few years and serve as brood stock for future generations. The state-run Nimbus Fish Hatchery near Sacramento usually releases 3 million of the 4 million Chinook smolts it raises into the nearby American River, but this year it's releasing all of them into the bay.

"Because of the conditions this year and the mortality, it's better to put them straight into the bay and get them back in three years," said fish technician Gregory Ferguson, who was herding the smolts in ponds toward pumps that sucked them into the truck tanks headed for Mare Island.

The commercial and recreational fishing industries have been pushing for the expanded trucking program to increase the chances of a decent salmon season in 2016, when the smolts released this year will be adults.

"I actually make my living just trolling for salmon, so it's pretty important for me," said John Terry, commercial salmon fisherman from Aberdeen, Washington, who was unloading his catch at San Francisco Fisherman's Wharf at the start of commercial salmon season. "We need the help."



A Chinook salmon smolt is displayed before it is among the more than 750, 000 released in San Pablo Bay near Vallejo.

Grazing on federal land under threat because of drought



Rancher Ken Wixom's 4,000 Rambouillet ewe sheep bunch up as they are herded to a new patch of Bureau of Land Management Land in the high desert in eastern Idaho. Because of the Western drought, the BLM has cut grazing land. (Allen J. Schaben, Los Angeles Times)

JULIE CART *contact the reporter*

LA TIMES 6/16/2014

Endangered Species Environmental Research Conservation Natural
Resources Environmental Issues Agriculture

Drought threatens grazing on federal land

Federal land can't continue to support livestock and wildlife

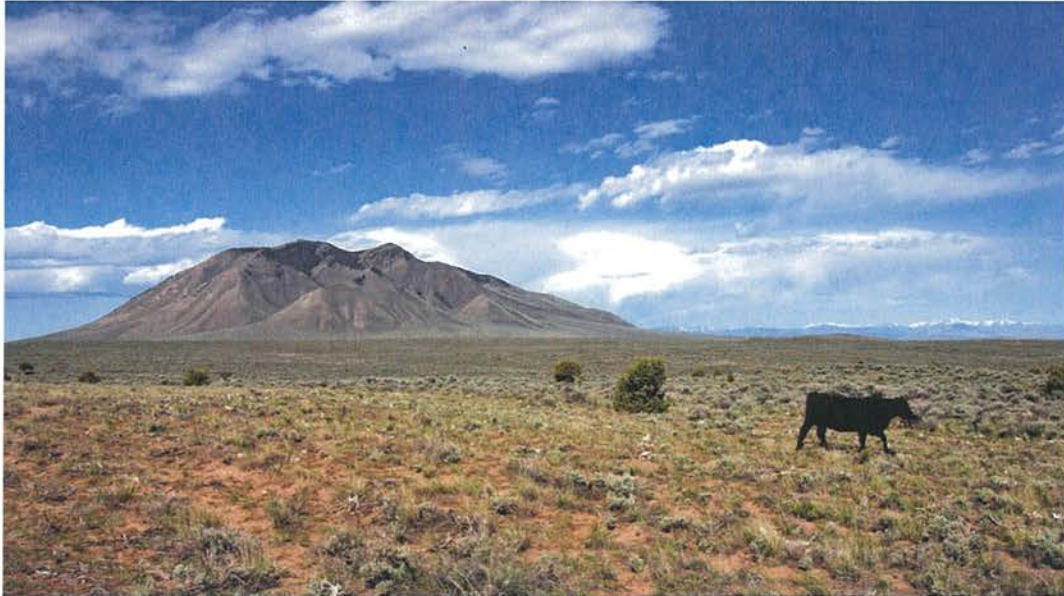
There's not much anyone can tell Barry Sorensen about Idaho's Big Desert that he doesn't know. Sorensen, 72, and his brother have been running cattle in this sere landscape all their lives, and they've weathered every calamity man and nature have thrown at them — until this drought came along.

Sitting recently in a rustic cabin where he spends many months looking after his cattle, Sorensen's voice was tinged with defeat.

"To be honest with you," he said, "I think our way of life is pretty much going to be over in 10 years."

Years-long drought has pummeled millions of acres of federal rangeland in the West into dust, leaving a devastating swath from the Rockies to the Pacific.

Add to that climate change, invasive plants and wildfire seasons that are longer and more severe, and conditions have reached a breaking point in many Western regions. The land can no longer support both livestock and wildlife.



CAPTION

A lone Angus cow grazes on native and nonnative grasses on Bureau of Land Management land near Atomic City in eastern Idaho. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

"All these issues — it's changing the landscape of the West, dramatically," said Ken Wixom, who grazes 4,000 ewes and lambs on BLM land in the Snake River Plain. For public lands ranchers like him who depend on federal acreage to sustain their animals, the mood ranges from brooding to surrender.

The situation was spelled out in stark terms in two recent letters from the federal Bureau of Land Management. They told the ranchers what they already knew: Unless something changes, the days of business as usual on the 154 million acres of federal grazing land are over.

This drought-stressed range in Idaho can no longer sustain livestock, the letter warned. Better plan to reduce herd numbers by at least 30% for the spring turnout.

"I knew it was coming," said Sorensen, squinting as the afternoon sun poured through a window.

Sorensen's grazing allotment is so compromised that he was forced to make multiple adjustments. He waited 2 1/2 weeks longer than usual before turning out his cows and calves on BLM pastures, and then released only half his herd. The rest he kept on his ranch, feeding them hay from his own fields.

Conditions could easily grow worse.

Livestock shares the range with wildlife, including the greater sage grouse, a species dependent on sagebrush and native grasslands to survive. The grouse population has

plummeted by 93% in the last 50 years, and its habitat has shrunk to one-quarter of its former 240,000-square-mile range.

If the federal government grants endangered species protection to the grouse sometime next year, ranching on federal land will be cut back even more, federal officials say. In some regions, public lands ranching might end altogether.

The problem for livestock and wildlife alike is that the drought has been merciless on all plants in the West. Last week 60% of the 11 Western states were experiencing some degree of serious drought.



His dogs keep their eyes out for stray sheep as rancher Ken Wixom, left, instructs sheep herder Ignacio Rupai where to herd Wixom's sheep on BLM land in eastern Idaho. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

Climate change has altered weather patterns so much that vegetation in some regions is transforming from abundant sagebrush, grass and forbs to a new landscape of weeds and cheat grass — fast-burning fuels that propel wildfire and destroy rangeland.

In southern New Mexico, the transformation has gone one step further — from sagebrush to weeds to sand-blown desert — and biologists say the pattern is likely to be repeated across the West.

If that happens, the economics of cattle ranching will unravel.

Public lands grazing is a remnant of Washington's interest in settling the West by providing a financial leg up to covered-wagon pioneers and private interests alike. Ranchers pay a fee, far below market rate, for each mother cow and calf they turn out to graze on BLM acreage.

If public land is not available, ranchers could find private property to graze their animals, paying as much as 16 times more than on federal ground. They could reduce their herds, losing valuable genetics and other breeding characteristics and getting perhaps \$1,000 for a cow that would cost \$1,600 to replace.

Ranchers could bring the cattle to their own land and feed them with hay or alfalfa they grow or buy. None of that is consistent with the business model of a public lands rancher.

"You buy hay at \$200 a ton, so you feed one ton for each 100 head of cows," said Sorensen. "If you've got 200 head of cows, you are feeding \$400 to \$500 dollars' worth of hay a day."

Critics of ranching on federal land have little sympathy. They say the operations are highly subsidized by taxpayers and are secondary to the goal of preserving wildlife and native ecosystems.

If you've got 200 head of cows, you are feeding \$400 to \$500 dollars' worth of hay a day.- Barry Sorensen

Grazing receipts in fiscal year 2013 were \$12.2 million, while the program cost the government \$48.2 million to operate. Fees are based on range conditions that existed in 1966, and the monthly charge of \$1.35 for a cow and calf hasn't significantly changed in 50 years. Sporadic attempts to raise fees have been fiercely and immediately quashed.

Ranchers argue that they are excellent stewards of the land and that they make improvements that benefit deer, birds and other wildlife as well as improve water quality.

"Without ranchers functioning, the landscape ceases to function," said rancher Shane Rosenkrance, 52, who grazes on 110,000 acres of BLM and state land in eastern Idaho.

Equally persuasive arguments are made by biologists and conservation groups. They say historic overgrazing caused wholesale changes to the landscape and fostered the damaging growth of cheat grass — which has fanned wildfires in the West.

And, they say, when ranchers allow cattle to trample streams and riverbeds, especially in a drought, crucial riparian areas can be destroyed.

The sage grouse is particularly vulnerable to sagebrush loss. Cattle grazing reduces forbs and grasses the birds use for protection and cover, leaving them exposed to predators.

Alarmed Western state governors, fearful that an endangered species listing could also mean the end of energy, mining and other commercial activities on federal land, are scrambling to protect the birds and their breeding grounds.

Kurt Wiedenmann, a BLM manager in Boise, said the drought and the sage grouse have federal and state agencies working together to find room for both grazing and the imperiled birds. Ranchers have already been hit hard by grazing cutbacks, Wiedenmann said, noting that many of them are small-scale, not corporate operations.

Leo Drozdoff, director of Nevada's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said federal land managers need to take stronger action to preserve sage grouse populations before they reach endangered levels.

"I don't think there's any doubt that overgrazing and some older grazing practices have not been helpful," Drozdoff said. "But this has been happening over decades, and for a variety of reasons. That should be an indication that the status quo isn't good enough."

Ranchers have responded by opposing efforts to list the grouse as endangered. This spring, Wixom, the sheep rancher, met with officials in Washington, D.C., to discuss the sage grouse. His advice to fellow ranchers is to stop complaining and start fighting.

"If you are in a fistfight, the last thing you want to do is start crying," Wixom said, leaning against the cab of his pickup. "If we come out here and say, 'We're doomed,' they are just going to hit you harder."



Shepherding dogs keep a watchful eye out as Ignacio Rupai, 38, from Peru, rides through federal grazing land in eastern Idaho. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)

Some environmental groups, such as Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project, can't envision any science-based plan to preserve sage grouse habitat that would allow sheep and cattle grazing.

"If land management agencies truly take science into account, the Forest Service and the BLM will have to greatly reduce grazing in ways we haven't seen before," said Travis Bruner, the organization's executive director. "A lot of ranchers will probably see it as a game changer."

Sorensen does. "I think it's inevitable" that the sage grouse will eventually push cattle off the range, he said.

When that happens, it will trigger a cascade of ruinous changes to an ecosystem that has adapted to livestock, he said.

"All of this ground is going to go to hell. There won't be any cattle to eat the grass. That grass will burn. Then there will be no sage grouse left."

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Saving the Santa Clara from wasteful diversion

JASON WEINER
GUEST COLUMNIST
Ventura County Star 6/15/2014

For thousands of years, communities have grown alongside the Santa Clara River, dependent on its water for drinking, watering crops, recreation, swimming and fishing. Yet, the Santa Clara is now one of the most endangered rivers in the nation.

A combination of poor water management and drought are threatening the communities that line its banks, and its native plants, fish and animals. To sustain the Santa Clara's ecosystem, Ventura County's agricultural economy, the groundwater basins of the fertile Oxnard Plain and the people of Ventura County for the long run, we must step into our responsibility to sustainably manage the river's water resources.

United Water Conservation District provides water to the agricultural and municipal entities in the Oxnard Plain via diversion of Santa Clara River flows at the Vern Freeman Diversion Dam for direct surface water delivery and groundwater recharge.

The Oxnard Plain groundwater basins are facing dangerous water level declines due to inefficient diversion of water at United's dam, the growth of water-guzzling unsustainable luxury crops, and the wasting of water from the widespread failure to use best-available farm and municipal conservation efficiency and reclamation practices.

These inefficient and wasteful practices threaten to extinguish the plain's groundwater supplies and cause seawater to intrude from the coast that may contaminate the region's fresh groundwater necessary for drinking and growing crops.

Here are the roots of these problems: United draws large amounts of water from the Santa Clara year-round at its diversion dam, more often than not sucking more than 10.5 miles of the Santa Clara dry instead of strategically taking, storing and infiltrating large amounts of river water during very wet rainy seasons or outside of the peak of heavy rainfalls when the total suspended solids in the river drop to levels that would allow for such diversion.

United could allow for needed river flow during drier periods by taking its legal historic diversion amounts from the Santa Clara when there is more than enough available for in-stream, agricultural and municipal uses to exist side by side.

In addition, decades of irresponsible water policy and management have stalled measures to secure the county from drought, and have created incentives for growers to switch from less waterintensive tree crops, to more water-intensive and highly profitable luxury crops like strawberries.

United's inefficient and cheap extraction of water from the Santa Clara is delivered at

prices three to 70 times less than water prices throughout California and in the same Oxnard Plain region.

Santa Clara River water is priced so inexpensively because United has not invested in high flow diversion infrastructure and off-stream storage, such as reservoirs, to store the Santa Clara's flows during very wet periods.

A consequence of these cheap prices is that many farmers and municipalities have ignored taking simple water conservation measures through the use of widely available technology, exasperating the strain on water supply.

Grower and board testimony before the local Fox Canyon Groundwater Management Agency, which has impermissibly allowed wasteful water use and overpumping of the plain's groundwater basins, demonstrate that traditional county crops can all be grown with much less water currently being applied to farms, and water prices must be raised to fund additional water supply infrastructure.

California's great rivers are held by the state in trust for the public, meaning they exist and must be protected by the state for the benefit of all its people, not select bigbusiness interests. The communities of Oxnard, Ventura, El Rio, Saticoy, Santa Paula, Fillmore and Piru have thrived alongside the Santa Clara for generations, but many are now suffering economic hardship.

Yet, most locals are barely aware that the Santa Clara exists for their benefit. This is because rising diversion of water since the 1940s has unnaturally weakened the river's flow downstream of United's Freeman Diversion Dam, limiting and impairing the Santa Clara's recreational, economic, cultural and ecological uses.

Wishtoyo, CAUSE and the Center for Biological Diversity have filed a public trust complaint with the State Water Board against United for its wasteful and unreasonable diversion and use of water from the Santa Clara.

We are urging United to take the necessary steps to improve our region's resilience to drought, protect Ventura County's beautiful environment, enhance the economic and job growth associated with live rivers and allow families and youth to enjoy this natural resource — all alongside a healthy agricultural economy. A copy of the complaint can be found at www.wishtoyo.org/pdf/SCR_PT_SWRCB_Complaint.pdf.

Jason Weiner is the Wishtoyo Foundation's general counsel and water initiative director.

Money woes clog Oxnard water proposal

Pump request stops project from flowing

By Gretchen Wenner
Ventura County Star 6/14/2014



A proposal for Oxnard's recycled water was discussed at the United Water Conservation District board meeting Wednesday. Tony Emmert (second from right) recently left the city to become the water district's deputy general manager. GRETCHEN WENNER/THE STAR

It's dry, getting drier, and farmers want Oxnard's recycled water.

But the city is no closer to delivering an ultrapure supply from its state-of-the-art facility after a new proposal fell through this week.

The stumbling block? Cash.

City officials say they need something solid to bank on because they must borrow \$120 million to make the project work. The money would pay for a pipeline system, storage reservoir and other items needed to supply farmers. What they asked for was a guarantee to pump groundwater to make the financing work.

The board of the United Water Conservation District on Wednesday afternoon called the city's plan a nonstarter. Members said they wouldn't promise pumping in the sensitive area Oxnard sought.

In the meantime the city's Advanced Water Purification Facility sits idle on Perkins Road. The plant, which cost \$75 million to design and build, will scrub treated sewage water to super clean levels that can be used to irrigate crops.

Wednesday's session was the latest in yearlong negotiations between the city and agricultural users. The task is complicated by the region's baroque system of groundwater pumping rules that evolved over decades to manage a system severely

stressed by over pumping and seawater intrusion.

A different money issue previously bogged negotiations: bridging the gap between what farmers were willing to pay and what it will cost Oxnard to produce the expensive supply. That was solved a year ago with a complex deal that was awaiting City Council approval but was never presented to the council.

Then in February as local groundwater regulators met to consider emergency pumping restrictions because of the drought, Oxnard officials said they had suspended efforts to move forward with the earlier deal. They blamed the emergency ordinance, saying they no longer could finance pipeline construction with the uncertainty it brought.

The city's new plan presented Wednesday called for guaranteed pumping of 5,000 acre-feet a year from the so-called "forebay" basin, regardless of groundwater conditions. An acre-foot totals about 326,000 gallons.

The overall proposal concerns 7,000 acre-feet of recycled water that will be produced annually when the plant's first phase starts up.

The United board's reaction indicated no support for relying on forebay pumping.

The forebay is a unique area around Saticoy and El Rio where geological conditions provide a doorway to groundwater supplies layered deep below the Oxnard Plain. United, which owns and operates key infrastructure such as Lake Piru and the Freeman Diversion Dam used to replenish groundwater, maintains facilities in the forebay that recharge the system with water diverted from the Santa Clara River.

The forebay also helps maintain pressure needed to prevent seawater intrusion along the coast. With the drought dragging on, certain forebay measures are well below sea level and are trending toward record levels set in the 1990s drought.

"The forebay is the linchpin of what we do in this area," said Lynn Maulhardt, United's board president, adding he wouldn't support a plan that allowed guaranteed pumping there.

Maulhardt also spoke of possible "draconian" changes that essentially could halt the district's groundwater replenishment efforts for several years. Federal requirements being considered to protect endangered steelhead trout could mean zero diversions at the Freeman facility, he said.

That could make "even a huge rainstorm go to the ocean," Maulhardt told attendees,

saying it was another reason he wouldn't consider guaranteed forebay pumping.

Other board members also rejected the idea. Some criticized Oxnard's management of its existing water system, where failed equipment, low staffing levels and other issues have kept a \$30 million groundwater desalter — one that came online less than six years ago — offline since about late December 2011.

"Oxnard really needs to get its act together" in the water department, said board member Sheldon Berger.

Board member Michael Mobley said of the unused water recycling plant: "It's crazy we're even having this conversation. To get this far and not cross the goal line is ridiculous."

Some suggested that Oxnard's cash flow problem should be addressed by the city raising its water rates, something that would bring revenue much more quickly than other ideas in the works.

Several speakers, including Oxnard's water lawyer and farmers eager to tap into the recycled supply, urged the board to move forward with the proposal.

"Let's get this program started," water attorney Rob Saperstein said, later adding: "I will be the first to admit the city has had 'the slows' in this process."

Rob Roshanian, Oxnard's interim public works director, told the panel that the city estimates the recycled water cost at \$1,700 per acrefoot, including capital costs. Of that, operating costs alone are estimated to be \$650 an acrefoot. The city would need to recover operating costs at a minimum, he said. Farmers generally are accustomed to paying \$200 or less per acrefoot.

Roshanian said the city is willing to look at every proposal offered to make the program work.

"Nobody wants this plant to sit there and do nothing," he told the board.

In the end the board said it would wait to hear from Oxnard about what to do next.

Editorial

California's drought and D.C.'s dry solutions



A grove of almond trees sits at the base of dry and barren hills near Firebaugh in California's drought-stricken Central Valley. (Justin Sullivan / Getty Images)

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LA Times 6/14/2014

Masquerading as a response to California's drought, a House bill aims to weaken the Endangered Species Act

A compromise between House and Senate bills on the drought would be bad for California

Masquerading as a response to California's drought, a bill to waive environmental protections and divert more water to Central Valley agriculture passed the Republican-controlled House in February and is now going to conference to be reconciled with a competing bill by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) that the Senate adopted last month.

Californians overwhelmingly reject loosening environmental regulations to increase water deliveries to farms and cities.-

Californians overwhelmingly reject loosening environmental regulations to increase water deliveries to farms and cities, as demonstrated by the results of a USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll released Friday. So you might think that Feinstein's alternative bill would propose a more palatable way to deal with the state's water crisis. But there's a catch — three of them, actually.

The first is that most of what the Senate bill offers — flexibility to reduce river flows to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta during emergencies in order to direct more water to Central Valley farmers — already exists. Water managers have authorized the maximum amount of river diversions consistent with laws in place to protect crippled salmon fisheries and prevent the collapse of not just the delta but the state's entire water delivery infrastructure. So Feinstein's bill either undermines those protections (the senator insists it does not) or merely engrafts into law what has already been accomplished administratively.

That takes us to the second catch. Any progress California hopes to make in attaining sustainable solutions to its long-term water crisis requires a great deal of trust on the part of all factions that science and expertise, and not politics, will govern day-to-day decisions about how much water is needed to protect a salmon run, for example, and how much can be diverted to farms. Changing rules that by all appearances are working sends a signal that Congress rather than water experts may at any moment take charge of the state's competing water needs. Such a precedent bodes ill for even more complicated programs, such as the twin tunnels proposed to divert water around the delta, because environmentalists and Northern California farmers won't sign on if they have no faith that science will guide decisions about when and how much to pump.

The third catch is that the Senate bill is a poor starting point for conference discussions with House Republicans, whose bill is geared more toward permanently weakening the Endangered Species Act than any drought relief or sustainable water solution. A compromise between the two bills would be bad for California.

The state does need federal water legislation — laws that incentivize agricultural and urban efficiency and assist in groundwater cleanup and recharging. Those are the areas in which Congress should be focusing its attention.

Water rationing already beginning to go wrong



COLUMNIST

Ventura County Star 6/13/2014

Despite the heavy mid-February rains that briefly drenched Northern California and the respectable ensuing snowfall in the Sierra Nevada, drought remains.

It may seem odd, but the opening compulsory rationing measures have come in Northern California, closer to the big rivers now carrying lower-than usual runoff from the high mountains than the big cities to the south, where water conservation is voluntary, so far. Reasons for this include the fact that the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California draws supplies from the Colorado River in addition to the Bay Delta region through which most of Northern California's water flows.

The Met has also spent many millions of dollars over the last 20 years to increase its storage capacity, creating new reservoirs and upping underground storage.

So some of the first serious compulsory rationing comes in places on the fringes of the San Francisco Bay Area, cities like Pleasanton and Dublin and Santa Cruz, which get much of their water from local supplies or the State Water Project, but don't have access to the water San Francisco draws from its Hetch Hetchy reservoir near Yosemite National Park.

Rationing is sensible in some places — like Santa Cruz, where all homes are now limited to 1,000 cubic feet of water per month, or about 249 gallons per day. Local officials say the limits are needed because the area's streams have all but dried up long before their wet season would normally end.

But in other places, like Pleasanton, a city of 70,000 on the eastern edge of the East Bay area, residents and businesses are compelled to use no more than 75 percent of the water they used at the same time last year.

The more you used in 2013, the more you can use today without paying penalties, which can see water bills double or triple upon a first offense and rise on subsequent violations.

So the water profligates of a year ago have an advantage over anyone who conserved water in 2013, when there was already drought, just not as severe. In short, if neighbors each had lawns of the same size and one watered freely last year, with no regard for conservation, but the other installed a drip irrigation system and cut water use substantially, the one who conserved now can use far less than his profligate neighbor.

How fair is that?

Inequitable situations like this were common in the major drought of the 1970s, when homeowners or businesses who saw drought worsening and realized rationing would ensue sometimes increased their water use to make sure they would have a good supply once rationing took hold.

No one can prove anybody did that this year, but it's very possible and it's a major flaw where cities ration according to past use.

Other water use inequities abound, too. How fair is it that drought or no drought, Sacramento residents (including tens of thousands of state officials and bureaucrats) use an average of 279 gallons per day, compared with 98 gallons for San Franciscans and less than 150 per day for Los Angeles residents, whom Northern Californians habitually accuse of profligacy?

Or for residents of ritzy Hillsborough on the San Francisco Peninsula to use 334 gallons of water daily, on average, to just 79 for those in far less fortunate East Palo Alto?

Plus, while there's a water metering program in progress in the Central Valley, about half the homes there still no have water meters at all, so owners or tenants can use all they want with no penalties.

As Southern Californians watch this and realize that given another year of drought, they will also be rationed, plenty will realize that the more they use now, the more they'll be able to use later — unless water rationing is done on a strict per capita basis.

Yes, it can sometimes be difficult to know how many people reside in each household, but census data can help — taken in 2010, it's still useful. Any household feeling shortchanged could complain and prove it has more occupants than the Census showed.

That's not a perfect system, but if adopted statewide, would at least be more fair than the patchwork of systems gradually being imposed now, with rationing just beginning and already starting to lean toward the unfair.

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