

# NEWS CLIPS

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## Eminent domain used in water fight

Inyo County battles for property taken by LA in early 1900s

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LOS ANGELES - A century after Los Angeles stealthily bought up rural land 200 miles north to secure valuable water rights, officials in the Owens Valley are fighting back.

Inyo County has launched eminent domain proceedings in an effort to take property acquired by Los Angeles in the early 1900s, the Los Angeles Times reported Thursday.

The scheme, in which agents from the big city quietly purchased land while posing as ranchers and farmers, became a key part of California history and the subject of the 1974 film "Chinatown." Los Angeles went on to drain the lush valley, taking the water via a great aqueduct to fuel the metropolis' explosive growth.

It's the first time Inyo County has used eminent domain against the LA Department of Water and Power, which owns 25 percent of the Owens Valley floor, the newspaper said.

Previous battles with the DWP focused on the environmental and economic damage caused by the pumping of local water supplies. But with its new strategy, the county seeks to pay fair market value for property and water rights needed for landfills, parks, commerce and ranchlands along a 112-mile stretch of Highway 395 east of the Sierra Nevada.

"We're using a hammer the DWP has never seen before in Owens Valley," Inyo County Supervisor Rick Pucci told the Times. "Our goal is the future health and safety of our communities."

A county appraisal concluded a fair market value for the total 200 acres of \$522,000, county officials said.

On Monday, the DWP declined that offer, saying it had yet to complete its own appraisals.

Some officials are already raising the possibility of mounting crowd-sourcing campaigns to fund additional acquisitions of DWP land for public benefit.

The latest county move comes after years of efforts by Los Angeles to make amends for taking the region's land and water.

In 2013, for instance, the city agreed to fast-track measures to control toxic dust storms that have blown across the eastern Sierra Nevada since LA opened the aqueduct a century ago that drained Owens Lake.

Inyo County officials see their effort to take back DWP land as an important step in restoring local control.

That worries DWP officials, who acknowledged they were caught off guard by the action.

“This is brand new. It could be a slippery slope and where it would lead us I don’t know,” Marty Adams, chief operating officer at the agency, said. “The county also wants the water rights on certain properties, which could have a cascading effect. We’re very concerned about that.”

As a gesture of conciliation, the city a year ago erected a \$4.6 million monument of granite and sculpted earth that now rises from a dry bed of Owens Lake. It features a public plaza with curved granite walls inspired by the wing shapes of shorebirds. Sculptures of earth and rock have been made to resemble whitecaps like those that graced the lake’s surface before it was transformed into a dust bowl.

## ESSENTIAL POLITICS

### Democrats vow to stop House water plan for state

Bill would cede more resources control to federal government. Harris, Feinstein and Brown are opposed.

SARAH D. WIRE  
LA Times 7/14/2017

WASHINGTON — Some of California's decisions about how to use its water would be relegated to the federal government under a bill passed by the House on Wednesday.

Republicans say the bill will bring more water to the parched Central Valley. California's Democratic senators have promised to fight the bill in the Senate because it weakens California's ability to manage its own resources.

The Gaining Responsibility on Water Act, sponsored by Central Valley Rep. David Valadao (R-Hanford), was approved in the House by a 230-190 vote largely along party lines.

Republicans say the bill would streamline dam construction and other water storage projects, and allow more water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to be used in the Central Valley rather than flowing out to sea.

"This is a reasonable approach. We're trying to fix some real problems that need to be adjusted," Valadao said.

Democrats say it would preempt California water laws and impede the Endangered Species Act by waiving some of the most stringent environmental reviews required by the law.

California's congressional delegation has long disagreed over how to respond to the state's water needs, often pitting protecting endangered species and preserving waterways against agricultural demands and drying wells.

Only one California Democrat, Rep. Jim Costa (D-Fresno), voted for the bill. He said he has concerns about two parts of the bill that affect his district, but he expects changes to be made in the Senate.

Much of the bill's provisions have passed the House before, but stalled in the Senate. With opposition from both California senators, and the Obama White House promising to veto, the Republican-led Senate never brought it up for a vote.

Rep. Jerry McNerney (D-Stockton) expects opposition from California's senators and governor to be enough to stop the bill before it reaches President Trump.

"Every two years we fight this thing out," McNerney said. "It's good political theater for some colleagues, but it's not going to get through the Senate."

But Valadao said he thinks having a Republican president improves its chances.

"I feel really good about it. I know we're going to have to negotiate with our senators, hopefully they'll come to the table," Valadao said.

The bill builds on a previous water measure that House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield) and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) negotiated last year, McCarthy said in a video released by his office.

"This will provide more water ... allow more of that water to come through the Valley where it's needed instead of out to the ocean," he said.

The previous measure was the result of years of negotiations between California's GOP members and Feinstein. It focused on environmental restrictions that have at times limited water deliveries from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California. It also allowed officials at state and federal water management agencies to exceed environmental pumping limits in order to capture more water during storms.

It passed over the objection of many California Democrats, including now-retired Sen. Barbara Boxer, who said it opened the door to bypassing the Endangered Species Act.

In a statement released early in the week, Feinstein and the state's new Sen. Kamala Harris, both Democrats, said they would do what they can to stop the bill in the Senate.

"California's Central Valley helps feed the world. It deserves sensible and responsible water solutions — this measure doesn't even come close to meeting that test," they said in a statement.

Gov. Jerry Brown pleaded with House leaders Monday to respect California's right to manage its own water and not hold the vote.

"California is the sixth-largest economy in the world and its future depends on the wise and equitable use of its water. Making decisions requires listening to and balancing among the needs of California's nearly 40 million residents and taking into consideration economics, biodiversity and wildlife resources," Brown said in a letter to lawmakers. "All of this is best done at the state and local level — not in a polarized political climate 3,000 miles away."

## Water's fine, district says

Las Virgenes Municipal Water District has released and mailed its 2016 Water Quality Report to homes and businesses in the district's 122-square-mile service area.

The report is also available online at [www.LVMWD.com](http://www.LVMWD.com).

The annual publication of test results reflects water-quality analyses conducted throughout 2016 and shows that the water delivered to LVMWD customers meets or surpasses state and federal drinking water standards, the district says.

"Tap water is among the most thoroughly tested products you purchase; it is monitored on an ongoing basis," LVMWD general manager David Pedersen said.

Pedersen said the water district objects to some vendors who try to sell home treatment systems "by disparaging the quality of (LVMWD) tap water."

The annual-water quality report is a state and federal requirement. Metropolitan Water District of Southern California joins local officials in performing water-quality tests at numerous locations in the service area throughout the year.

## Growing pains

What are we doing planting marigolds in the parkway on Kanan and Canwood across from the Shell gas station?

As of yesterday, half of them were dead or dying. When I drive by later today the others will most likely be dried up also.

Haven't our landscapers heard of succulents? Sure, initially more costly than marigolds but in the long run they'll be there next year thriving with little or no water to support them.

**Vince Vespe**  
**Agoura Hills**

RIGHT  
😊



WRONG



Irrigating efficiently saves  
money and water!



[www.LVMWD.com/Irrigation-Efficiency](http://www.LVMWD.com/Irrigation-Efficiency)

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# A new chapter opens in Owens Valley water saga

Inyo County turns to eminent domain in bid for DWP land.



IRRIGATION gates on a slough near the Owens River near Bishop. Inyo County aims to use eminent domain rules to regain land, and water rights, owned by L.A. (Mark Boster Los Angeles Times)

By Louis Sahagun  
LA Times 7/13/2017

BISHOP, Calif. — A century ago, agents from Los Angeles converged on the Owens Valley on a secret mission.

They figured out who owned water rights in the lush valley and began quietly purchasing land, posing as ranchers and farmers.

Soon, residents of the Eastern Sierra realized much of the water rights were now owned by Los Angeles interests. L.A. proceeded to drain the valley, taking the water via a great aqueduct to fuel the metropolis' explosive growth.

This scheme became an essential piece of California history and the subject of the classic 1974 film "Chinatown." In the Owens Valley, it is still known as the original sin that sparked decades of hatred for Los Angeles as the valley dried up and ranchers and farmers struggled to make a living.

But now, the Owens Valley is trying to rectify this dark moment in its history.

Officials have launched eminent domain proceedings in an effort to take property acquired by Los Angeles in the early 1900s.

It is the first time Inyo County has used eminent domain rules against the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, which owns 25% of the Owens Valley floor, officials said Wednesday.

Unlike previous battles with the DWP that focused on the environmental and economic damage caused by L.A.'s pumping of local water supplies, the county seeks to pay fair market value for property and water rights needed for landfills, parks, commerce and ranchlands along a 112-mile stretch of Highway 395 east of the Sierra Nevada.

"We're using a hammer the DWP has never seen before in Owens Valley," Inyo County Supervisor Rick Pucci said. "Our goal is the future health and safety of our communities."

The move comes after years of efforts by Los Angeles to make amends for taking the region's land and water. In 2013, for instance, the city agreed to fast-track measures to control toxic dust storms that have blown across the eastern Sierra Nevada since L.A. opened the aqueduct a century ago that drained Owens Lake.

As a gesture of conciliation, the city a year ago erected a \$4.6-million monument of granite and sculpted earth that now rises from a dry bed of Owens Lake. It features a public plaza with curved granite walls inspired by the wing shapes of shorebirds. Sculptures of earth and rock have been made to resemble whitecaps like those that graced the lake's surface before it was transformed into a noxious dust bowl.

But in Owens Valley, Angelenos bearing gifts have always elicited skepticism — and occasionally sparked eruptions of violence. The aqueduct was dynamited repeatedly after increased pumping exacerbated a drought during the 1920s that laid waste to local farms and businesses.

Inyo County officials see their effort to take back DWP land as an important step in taking back local control.

That worries DWP officials, who acknowledged they were caught off guard by the action.

"This is brand new. It could be a slippery slope, and where it would lead us I don't know," said Marty Adams, chief operating officer at the agency. "The county also wants the water rights on certain properties, which could have a cascading effect. We're very concerned about that."

The Inyo County Board of Supervisors directed its staff to study the use of eminent domain after the DWP a year ago proposed a fourfold rent increase of more than \$20,000 annually at a landfill in Bishop operated by the county on land it has leased from the DWP for decades, said Rick Benson, assistant county administrator.

The proposed lease included a clause allowing the DWP to terminate the agreement for any reason with a 180-day notice, he said.

After months of heated negotiations, the county approved the new three-year lease agreement in January because, Benson said: “We had no choice.”

“We’re mandated by the state to provide environmentally sound means of disposal,” he said. “But the cost of abandoning that landfill and building and certifying a new one elsewhere would be astronomical.”

Beyond that, he said, the California Department of Resources, Recycling and Recovery refused to renew an operating permit for the landfill until a new lease was in place on the property.

In March, Inyo County Administrator Kevin Carunchio notified the DWP of the county’s decision to condemn that landfill site and two others in the towns of Independence and Lone Pine. That would set in motion legal proceedings that could lead to its taking ownership from the DWP.

A county appraisal concluded a fair market value for the total 200 acres of \$522,000, county officials said. On Monday, the DWP declined that offer, saying it had yet to complete its own appraisals.

Some officials are already raising the possibility of mounting crowd-sourcing campaigns to fund additional acquisitions of DWP land for public benefit.

“The county would obviously like more economic opportunities,” the DWP’s Adams said, “and we support that.”

In the meantime, Owens Valley towns — including Big Pine, Independence, Lone Pine and Olancho — struggle to survive, with most of their developable land and water rights controlled by the DWP.

In 1997, the DWP agreed to relinquish 75 acres in the Owens Valley for residential and commercial uses, and the county amended its General Plan to ensure that land exchanges did not result in a net loss of tax base or revenues. Since then, county officials say, lots on only a fraction of that acreage have changed hands because the DWP has tended to set minimum bids far above market value.

In 2009, a group of Owens Valley residents sent a petition to then-Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the Los Angeles City Council urging them to force the DWP to compensate for the loss of private land it planned to buy in the region by releasing an equal amount of its own holdings elsewhere. The city never responded, according to activists who helped write the petition.

The DWP has spent more than \$1 billion to comply with a 1997 agreement with the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District to combat the powder-fine dust from the dry 110-square-mile Owens Lake bed.

Separately, after decades of political bickering and a bruising court fight, the DWP directed water back into a 62-mile-long stretch of the Lower Owens River that had been left essentially dry after its flows of Sierra snowmelt were diverted to the Los Angeles Aqueduct. But it later balked at removing thick stands of reeds that swiftly choked the renewed river.

The DWP caused an uproar during the drought in 2015 when it gave ranchers 48 hours' notice of its intention to reduce their irrigation water from the usual 49,000 acre-feet a year to 20,500 acre-feet a year. The agency abandoned the deadline after Inyo County threatened to seek an injunction to stop what it contended was a violation of long-term water agreements that would devastate the local economy.

Farming and ranching generate \$20 million a year in rural Inyo County, second only to tourism, officials said.

Jenifer Castaneda, a Lone Pine real estate broker and community activist, had one word to say about the county's use of eminent domain: "Awesome."

Castaneda said she only hopes local leaders are ready for a long fight and that they don't "cave when Los Angeles dangles some kind of big fat carrot in front of their noses."



Security First National Bank L.A.

**LOS ANGELES'** acquisition of water rights in the Owens Valley sparked decades of hatred.



Los Angeles Department of Water & Power

**A CROWD** gathers in 1913 to witness the opening of the aqueduct bringing water to Los Angeles from the Owens Valley, hundreds of miles to the north.



LOUIS SAHAGUN Los Angeles Times

**INYO COUNTY** Assistant Administrator Rick Benson at a landfill in Bishop, Calif., owned by the DWP and leased by the county, which has launched condemnation proceedings to take the site and its water rights for public benefit.

# Oxnard approves rate hike for water

## It's fourth utility increase this year

WENDY LEUNG

Ventra County Star 7/13/2017

In September, Oxnard residents and businesses will see their utility bills go up, the fourth such increase this year.

The Oxnard City Council on Tuesday approved a water rate hike that equates to an 8 percent increase, or \$3.60, for the average household.

Council members all backed the increase, including Councilman Bryan MacDonald, who has wavered in his support for past utility rate increases.

"As unfond as I am with increases, I think it's reasonable. I think it's needed," MacDonald said. "It's not something I thought I'd say."

The series of utility rate increases, which started last year with a controversial 35 percent spike in wastewater rates, is needed to close a giant funding gap caused by a lack of rate increases in previous years, according to the city staff.

## Last year's wastewater rate increase

spawned a ballot measure, a lawsuit and a potential recall of four leaders on the council. MacDonald, who initially voted against the wastewater rate hike earlier this year but changed his mind for the final vote, is not a subject of the recall.

In February, the average household saw a \$3.62 increase in a water bill hike known as a "pass-through." In July, both the wastewater and trash portions of the utility bill increased.

For the past several years, water fund expenditures have outpaced revenues by the millions. Assistant City Manager Ruth Osuna said that while the increase approved on Tuesday will help close the gap, it's not enough for the long term.

The city is expected to go through a water rate increase process again next year to set higher rates for the next five years starting in 2019. "This will not get us out of the woods. We will not have a fully funded water fund," Osuna said. With the increase, Osuna said the ending balance would be more than \$300,000 next year. Without it, the water fund would be \$3.8 million in the hole.

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City staff members have been making their case for a water rate increase since 2015.

The council majority voted against increases to water and trash rates in January 2016. At the time, Mayor Tim Flynn said the city hadn't clearly communicated the need for such an increase. He repeated that sentiment again last July, when the same council majority consisting of Flynn, Mac-Donald and Councilman

**“This will not get us out of the woods. We will not have a fully funded water fund.”**  
**RUTH OSUNA ASSISTANT CITY MANAGER**

Bert Perello voted against the water rate hike.

In Councilwoman Carmen Ramirez’s defense of the proposed water rate hike last year, she said she didn’t want Oxnard to become Flint, Michigan, long plagued with a tainted water supply.

On Tuesday, Flynn said the city has reliable financial figures after completing two audits, something it didn’t have before last summer.

“The public should — it doesn’t have to, but the public should — trust this \$3.60-per-household increase is an honest, accurate figure that is going to assure all customers get clean, reliable water,” Flynn said. “We are not going to be Flint, Michigan, in Oxnard, California.”

When factoring the rates of single-family, multi-family, industrial and commercial uses, the new rates represent a 14 percent increase.

The rates set a different two-tier system for multi-family properties. While the current tiered system benefits properties with fewer units, the new rate structure is based on water usage per unit regardless of the property’s size. In some cases, the multifamily rate will increase by as much as 35 percent.

Under state law, the increase cannot go into effect if a majority of the roughly 18,500 ratepayers submit a protest letter. However, just 556 letters were submitted.

The next City Council meeting will be Tuesday with a 2 p.m. start time.

## Calif. fires are early, unpredictable after winter rains

**CHRISTOPHER WEBER** ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ventura County Star 7/12/2017

Timber and brush parched from a yearslong dry spell and thick grass that grew after drought-busting winter downpours are making for early and unpredictable wildfire behavior that California officials haven't seen for years, if at all.

Dense layers of new grass are providing a "fine fuel" for flames that then gain speed and intensity by moving through "standing dead fuel" made up of vegetation and trees that shriveled during the state's six-year drought, said Kathleen Schori with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"It's difficult to remember a year quite like this one," she said Tuesday. "There's such a mix of fuels that these large damaging fires are starting at least a month earlier than usual." The result, she said, could be a longer and more destructive fire season than California has experienced in a while.

Crews were making progress against dozens of wildfires across California, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico.

Authorities surveying the damage from a blaze in Northern California said Tuesday that at least 36 homes and 37 other buildings had been destroyed near the town of Oroville, about 150 miles northeast of San Francisco.

Residents had started to return home after fleeing a wildfire in the grassy foothills of the Sierra Nevada, about 60 miles north of Sacramento, but at least 4,000 were still evacuated. The blaze burned nearly 9 square miles and injured four firefighters. It was partially contained.

Schori said this year's conditions were similar to California's

1979 wildfire season, which came on the heels of a two-year dry spell and saw blazes blackening a total of 386 square miles of grass, brush and timber and causing more than \$30 million in damage. However, that year's major fires didn't kick off until well into August, she said, as did the destructive 1992 blazes that followed a drought that started five years earlier.

Major downpours last winter pulled the state out of years of drought but also brought a layer of grass that early-summer fires are greedily feeding on.

"That creates faster-moving fires, hotter fires; it carries fire much more readily," said Santa Barbara County Fire Department Capt. Dave Zaniboni, whose agency was battling two large wildfires.

Older, dried-out trees and vegetation are especially dangerous for wildland blazes, but enough new and drying grass can provide links between such tinderboxes.



## **Victims after winter rains**



The remains of a burned structure stand near Santa Barbara on Monday. A pair of fires raged at different ends of Santa Barbara County, breaking out amid a blistering weekend heat wave. MIKE ELIASON/SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT VIA AP

With the dense grass as the “carrier,” the firefight becomes much more challenging because “you have to make sure the water is getting all the way down to the smoldering areas below,” Schori said. “It takes a lot more effort to extinguish grass fires.”

Two new fires forced evacuations on Tuesday.

One blaze broke out in San Diego County about 2 p.m. and quickly surged to over half a square

mile. It forced the closure of Interstate 8 and the evacuation of five homes in Alpine, a town of 15,000 people about 50 miles northeast of San Diego.

In Northern California, the Placer County Sheriff’s Office has issued mandatory evacuations along four roads near a 2-acre fire burning north of Auburn.

California isn’t the only state struggling with wildfires. In Colorado, crews were winding down the fight against a wildfire that temporarily forced the evacuation of hundreds of people near the resort town of Breckenridge.



The Rancho Alegre Outdoor School camp near Santa Barbara on Monday shows the damage caused by a recent wildfire. Thousands of people were forced from their homes. MIKE ELIASON/SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT VIA AP

## In a new fire season, just what will ignite?

Neither a long drought nor a wet winter is a true predictor



**FIREFIGHTERS Aaron Williams, left, Lyle Bennett, Robert Larios and Crawford Gunn put out hot spots in the 11,000-acre Whittier fire, which was burning on both sides of Highway 154 south of Lake Cachuma. (Al Seib Los Angeles Times) A HOUSE AND A CAR are engulfed as the Wall fire roars through an Oroville neighborhood. The blaze, which destroyed 37 structures, slowed Monday. (Josh Edelson AFP/Getty Images)**

By Paige St. John and Bettina Boxall  
LA Times 7/11/2017

OROVILLE, Calif. — It's that time of year, when smoke billows over the backcountry, rural homeowners flee flames and firefighting agencies warn that California is in for another brutal wildfire season.

During the state's long drought, firefighters repeatedly said withered landscapes portended plenty of big burns. Now, after a drought-busting winter, they are predicting a bad fire season because all that wet weather produced a bumper crop of grass and new growth that blanketed the mountains and foothills with more fuel.

Both perspectives are legitimate. But neither situation guarantees a bad year on the fire lines, most experts agree. Just look at Southern California, which experienced several mild wildfire seasons during the drought despite pitiful rainfall and shriveled chaparral.

Why? Because the dry, hot Santa Ana winds that have historically driven the region's most devastating wildland fires didn't blow much, or didn't blow when somebody or something started a fire.

"There's always going to be vegetation," said Richard Halsey, director of the California Chaparral Institute. "You've got to have the right combination of people doing stupid things on a hot day, an ignitable source of fuel and the winds."

Dozens of small grass and brush fires may break out over a hot summer weekend statewide, and firefighters knock most of them down quickly.

This weekend, despite scorching temperatures, they contained the majority of the 20 more significant wildfires at a few thousand acres.

The exceptions were the Alamo and Whittier fires on the Central Coast, the Wall fire in Butte County, the Garza fire in Fresno County and the lightning-caused Schaeffer fire north of Kernville.

The Wall fire, which charred 5,800 acres and destroyed 37 structures near Oroville, slowed Monday.

"It's difficult to say how it is going, because it encompasses such a large area, but the acreage hasn't increased in 24 hours," said Gabe Lauderdale, a Cal Fire public information officer.

On Saturday morning, Leanne Beck and her husband, Mike, stood at the top of their property and watched bulldozers cut a fuel break around the eastern edge of the fire, which was burning in oak woodlands carpeted with 2 1/2 -foot-tall grass.

They had moved into their double-wide on 40 acres near Lake Oroville in 2013, while smoke still hung in the air soon after the state made a stand against the Swedes Flat fire by lighting a backfire near their property line. In the ensuing four years they cut brush and did their best to remove dead trees, building a defensible space. They felt prepared. So they had stayed put Friday when Butte County deputies drove through with loudspeakers and ordered evacuation of a large swath of mountain land off Chinese Wall Road.

By Saturday afternoon their confidence had waned. When they saw the ridge explode in flames, they packed up their dogs and left.

Monday morning at the Red Cross evacuation shelter in Oroville, Beck stood stunned by the news that a weeping neighbor drove to town to deliver. Their home was a pile of cinders.

“I feel like I’m 102 right now,” said Beck, a 60-year-old retiree whose husband still works at a software job. “We’ve been sitting here for three days, not knowing, and now, you don’t want to know.”

Some 115 people remained at the Oroville shelter Monday, some watching the Wall fire’s progress from the parking lot.

Beck’s eyes began to water but she blinked back tears. She talked about taking a trip to visit her grandchildren, and laughed at what she and her husband had grabbed when they left their house for the last time.

It was a weed whacker, still boxed, and too late to put to work. Her thought at that moment: “Maybe I can return this.”

With the blaze 40% contained Monday evening, it still threatened 5,400 homes. Thousands of Butte County residents remained under evacuation orders not far from where people were forced from their homes last winter when damage to Lake Oroville’s spillways threatened to unleash a wall of water.

“We have a joke about Oroville,” said Red Cross shelter manager Pam Deditch, who normally works as a behavioral health counselor for the county. “Here, it’s hell or high water.”

Four hundred miles south, near Santa Maria, the 29,000-acre Alamo fire snaked south through Tepusquet Canyon over the weekend, where dozens of houses are perched in the hills and cows graze on wide green pastures.

Curtis Tunell, 73, a retired roofing contractor, and his wife, Linda, 67, returned to their home Monday afternoon to check on their two horses and two dogs. Their house was untouched by the flames. “It was pretty dicey there for a while,” he said.

The 11,000-acre Whittier fire was burning in a mix of oak woodland and chaparral on both sides of Highway 154 south of Lake Cachuma in Los Padres National Forest, which has been hammered by wildfires during the last decade.

Halsey, of the Chaparral Institute, said he was particularly concerned because it appeared the flames were moving into areas that had escaped the other blazes. “There’s a treasured landscape of old-growth chaparral. And there’s so little left of it. It’s a habitat that provides sources of food and shelter.”

Moreover, if chaparral and sagebrush burn too often, they won’t regrow and will turn into a landscape of highly flammable grasses that are dry most of the year.

“One of the changes that’s happened over the last two decades [in Southern California] is more and more conversion of chaparral and particularly sage scrub into annual grasslands,” said Phil Rundel, a professor of ecology at UCLA.

Max Moritz, a wildlife specialist with UC Cooperative Extension, says this year may provide a lesson in what happens with dramatic swings between wet and dry, as is expected to occur more frequently with climate change.

Deep soil moisture levels haven’t necessarily recovered from the drought, which included the driest four-year period in the state’s record. That, Moritz said, could mean vegetation dries out earlier in the fire season than would be expected after plentiful rains.

Even though “we had a relatively wet winter we may still see the ghosts of the last several years of drought play out,” he said.

St. John reported from Oroville and Boxall from Los Angeles. Times staff writer Meg Bernhard in Santa Maria contributed to this report.



A HOUSE AND A CAR are engulfed as the Wall fire roars through an Oroville neighborhood. The blaze, which destroyed 37 structures, slowed Monday. (Josh Edelson AFP/Getty Images)

## Wildfires ease as heat, winds diminish

### Fire crews report progress near Oroville

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Ventura County Star 7/11/2017

OROVILLE - Five months ago, it was fears over flooding. Now it's flames.

When Chuck Wilsey was ordered to flee over the weekend as a wildfire roared near his ranch home in Oroville, he was ready. He started keeping his truck and camper loaded with supplies back in February, when some of the heaviest winter rains on record in Northern California nearly led to catastrophic flooding below the nation's tallest dam.

"Fire and flood so close together," he marveled on Monday at a Red Cross shelter. "We just try to stay prepared."

Wilsey, 53, and his family were among about 4,000 people evacuated as flames raced through grassy foothills in the Sierra Nevada, about 60 miles north of Sacramento. Sheriff's deputies drove through neighborhoods announcing evacuation orders over loudspeakers.

Authorities were hopeful some Oroville evacuees would be able

to return Monday as winds diminished and firefighters working in rugged terrain extended containment lines.

Slightly cooler temperatures and diminishing winds helped firefighters battling wildfires at both ends of the state.

Wilsey said he believed his home was still standing because crews were able to keep flames from jumping a key mountain road.

His daughter, Krystle Chambers, who lives on the same property, said the one-two punch of floods and fires was taking its toll.

"It's hard, it's rough," she said. "Way too many hits. First it's this side of town, then the other side of town. It almost makes you want to move."

The blaze burned nearly 9 square miles of grass, injured four firefighters and destroyed at least 17 structures. It was 35 percent contained.

The area burning is southeast of Oroville, near where 200,000 residents downstream from the 770-foot-high Oroville Dam were briefly evacuated in February when the structure's spillways began crumbling. Wilsey did not have to leave his home that time.

Here's a look at other fires burning in the Western United States and Canada.

California

In Southern California, at least 3,500 people evacuated as two fires raged at separate ends of Santa Barbara County. The largest fire has charred more than 45 square miles of dry brush and is threatening more than 130 rural homes. It's 15 percent contained.

About 50 miles south, a 17-square-mile blaze shut down State Route 154 and sent weekend campers scrambling for safety. It's just 5 percent contained.

#### Colorado

Firefighters are making progress battling wildfires burning in Colorado. As of Monday, crews have been able to build containment lines around 85 percent of the fire that forced the evacuation of hundreds of people near Breckenridge last week.

In northwestern Colorado, a wildfire burning near Dinosaur National Monument is 40 percent contained. Portions of the 20-square-mile Peekaboo Fire have spread into steep, rocky terrain without a lot of fuel.

#### Arizona

In Arizona, rain has helped firefighters working a wildfire in mountains overlooking Tucson while also creating unsafe conditions for the crews.

Fire management officials say monsoon rains "hit the bull's-eye" Sunday, dropping more than 1 inch of rain in one area of the Santa Catalina Mountains. However, the rain also caused flooding and washed out roads and was accompanied by lightning, forcing firefighters to pause their work.

The fire has burned 42.6 square miles of grass, brush and timber since starting June 30. Its cause is under investigation. It is 51 percent contained.

#### Montana

Crews are gaining the upper hand on a fire burning south of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in north-central Montana.

The July fire has burned more than 16 square miles in the Little Rocky Mountains and has threatened the surrounding towns of Zortman, Landusky, Hays and Lodgepole.

The fire was 50 percent contained Monday morning. Crews were working to protect structures in the four towns while reinforcing fire lines and trying to prevent it from spreading to the reservation.

#### Idaho

A wildfire burning in southwestern Idaho has grown to about 62.5 square miles overnight, forcing the closure and evacuation of Bruneau Dunes State Park. Officials say the blaze is expected to grow.



# OXNARD MULLS WATER RATE

## Residents can speak at council meeting

WENDY LEUNG

Ventura County Star 7/10/2017

Water rates will be front and center during Tuesday's Oxnard City Council meeting, when residents will be given the last opportunity to protest the impending increase. The plan is to increase water rates by 8 percent for the average household. The average increase when factoring multi-family homes, commercial and industrial usage is 14 percent. A typical household with a monthly water bill of \$46.16 will pay \$3.60 more under the proposed rates. A household paying \$94.93 will pay \$16.49 more.

If approved, the new rates will go into effect in September.

The proposed rates also would change the three-tier structure for multi-family housing to a two-tier structure based on water usage. The current structure is based on the number of units in a property.

During a utilities task force meeting on Thursday, Assistant City Manager Ruth Osuna said the city's water fund has been operating at a monthly loss of \$450,000.

"By September or October during this fiscal year, we would be running out of money and going into a deficit," she said.

With the increased rates, the city will end the fiscal year with \$4.6 million in reserves, far from the reserves goal of \$24 million. The reserves goal covers operations for three months and factors

in debt obligations and depreciation.

During Tuesday's meeting, the city clerk will collect and tabulate letters protesting the rate hike. For a protest to be successful, the city must receive letters from the majority of ratepayers, or nearly 19,000 people.

The planned rates are expected to last 16 months, at which time rates will increase again. The next increase will include a citizens panel to provide input on rates for the next five years beginning in 2019.

Osuna said because the water fund was quickly running out of money, the city bypassed the citizens panel process this time.

Earlier this year, residents saw their water bills increase by an average of \$3.62 in a rate hike known as a "pass-through." The cost represents the increase the city is charged by Calleguas Municipal Water and United Water Conservation districts.

The meeting will begin 6 p.m. at the Council Chambers, 305 W. Third St.

## Forget the rain; here comes fire

About 120 million people in the West live on 200 million acres at high risk of burning.

By Gary Ferguson  
LA Times 7/09/2017

Summer in the American West. The time of flip-flops, river rafting, mountain fishing and Frisbee on the beach. But increasingly, also a time of stepping into our backyards and lifting our noses to sniff for smoke. For watching the flags atop the bank or outside City Hall to see how hard the wind is blowing.

Or if we're especially unlucky — and we've been unlucky a lot in the last decade — for packing precious bits and pieces of our lives into boxes and stacking them beside the front door, ready to load into the car should word come down that wildfires are closing in; that it's time to evacuate. Indeed some of us are right now in the worst of it all over again: In Breckenridge, Colo. In California's Yolo County. In British Columbia.

From the Rockies to the Pacific, the last 16 years have brought an astonishing 11 summers with more than a dozen so-called mega-fires, defined as a single burn engulfing more than 100,000 acres. More to the point of our anxieties, about 120 million of us are living on some 200 million acres considered to be at high risk of burning. We're living our lives, as will our children and our grandchildren, in a land of flames.

The problem is partly the result of 80 years of over-aggressive fire suppression, beginning in the early 20th century. Because of the arid nature of the West, when trees die, the primary way they decompose is through fire. Putting out every burn we could get to played well to the "conquer the foe" aspect of our national character, but it also eliminated the fairly regular, altogether natural "maintenance fires" that kept the forest healthy.

Which leaves us today with hundreds of millions of acres of forest burdened with unnaturally heavy fuel loads. Understandably, many wildfire experts are pushing hard for "treatments" that involve either thinning or prescribed burning. Yet one of the agencies primarily responsible for such work, the U.S. Forest Service, continues to drain its budget in the actual fighting of fires. In several years since 2000, the Forest Service has spent 500 times more on suppression — about \$2.5 billion — than on prevention.

To make matters worse, our past forest management mistakes are running smack into climate change. In a groundbreaking study published last fall, researchers at Columbia University and the University of Idaho quantified the effect of human-caused climate change on wildfire activity: Since 1985, global warming has nearly doubled the annual number of acres burning in the western United States.

Faster melting snowpacks and increased warmth in the fall have grown the fire season by a staggering 75 days since 1972. The increased heat, along with profound drought have routinely stressed trees — killing many outright or leaving them vulnerable to lethal beetle infestations. In 2016 alone, it's estimated that more than 60 million trees died in California.

And now, the deluded Trump administration has yanked us out of the Paris climate accord and begun the process of opening more Western lands, seas and forests to oil and coal development. This, when we should be doing all we can to end our carbon-emitting ways.

A different but equally dangerous delusion infects America's worst wildfire zones. According to the International Assn. of Wildland Fire, only about 3% of the 70,000 communities in those zones have taken steps to make their neighborhoods "fire-wise." Simple measures such as creating non-flammable 5-foot landscape zones around homes, cleaning gutters and covering attic vents with wire mesh to block blowing embers can make a difference. County governments in wildfire areas should mandate at least 30 feet between houses to help prevent house-to-house ignition, and the installation of adequate on-site water supplies for firefighters.

In the winter of 2016-17, near record-breaking rains and snow relieved the drought in some parts of the West. Wildfire experts recognize the generous rainy season as a blessing, but not a cure. Although holdover moisture in trees and big shrubs may keep some fires in check, when the thick mats of grasses created by all that moisture dry out in late summer, it will create conditions in which fires can ignite easily and spread rapidly. From January through June in California, despite its wet winter, twice as many acres had burned compared with last year.

Without a doubt, Westerners will be in the news in the coming weeks — clutching our loved ones and watching our homes go up in smoke. You'll see the tragic shots of smoldering backcountry tracts and houses burned to their foundation, right after the clips of firefighters, who will be cast, deservedly, as the heroes of this story.

For most of my life I grew up thinking of summer as a time for optimism, a notion I still haven't entirely shaken. I don't hope for an end to the flames — they come with the territory, after all. But I do hope we rise from the inevitable ashes determined to bring humans and fire into better balance, to mitigate the self-inflicted danger of climate

change, as well as to make sound forest practices a priority in the federal budget. If the beginning of another burning season offers harsh reminders of the mistakes we've made, it also prompts us to create a more sustainable future for all the Western summers yet to come.

Gary Ferguson is the author of "Land On Fire: The New Reality of Wildfire in the West." He lives on the edge of Montana's Custer National Forest.

# State's next crisis: Cost of water

MICHAEL HILTZIK  
LA Times 7/09/2017



City of Santa Barbara

**A SANTA BARBARA** seawater desalination plant is back online after a \$71-million reactivation. The cost of desalination far outstrips the cost of water recovered via conservation and recycling, one expert says.

The price of almost everything is on the rise, but we tend to shrug off inflation in goods and services we can cut back or do without. Not water, the rising cost of which is looming as a defining economic problem in coming years.

In California and across the nation, concern about water affordability has been spreading, with good reason. Few basic commodities are under as much cost pressure.

“The water infrastructure is aging, there’s more water contamination and our standards for cleanliness keep rising, and climate change is making our supplies less reliable,”

says Laura Feinstein of the Pacific Institute , an Oakland-based environmental think tank. “At some point the bill comes due” — but because water demand is stable or even dropping, water agencies can find revenue to cover the bill only by raising rates on consumption.

The result is an inexorable rise in water rates. Rates in Los Angeles rose by as much as 71% from 2010 to 2017, according to a survey by Circle of Blue , a water news website. In San Francisco the increase was as much as 127%, and 119% even for the stingiest users, a group that presumably includes many low-income residents.

Outside California, some municipalities are taking aggressive steps to bring down the cost of water for low-income residents. Philadelphia initiated the nation’s first income-based water rate on July 1. Under the program, a household earning less than 50% of the federal poverty line, or \$12,300 for a family of four, will pay no more than 2% of their monthly income in water, sewer and stormwater charges. The rate rises with income; a household earning between 100% and 150% of the poverty level will pay no more than 3% of income for those services.

In Atlanta, which is facing an enormous bill for infrastructure construction and maintenance, voters last year approved a four-year extension of a 1% sales tax to cover the cost, so it could be spread beyond water ratepayers alone.

Finding ways to ensure affordability is an especially acute problem in California, where water service is provided by a patchwork of more than 3,000 city, county, mutual and private agencies, some of which are too small to shoulder the burden of lifeline rates for their poorest customers. Their options are limited by Proposition 218 of 1996, which forbids charging more to higher-income municipal customers to fund rebates or subsidies for poorer residents.

Complicating the issue is that water rates are generally set locally. Proposition 218 requires that they have some relation to the cost of providing the water in the case of public agencies like the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power; the Public Utilities Commission oversees rates only for nine private water companies, which cover about 15% of the state’s residents.

But the need is growing. “We have lifeline rates for electricity, weatherization, even telephones,” says J.R. DeShazo of UCLA’s Luskin School of Public Affairs, “but we do not have a statewide program that ensures that people have affordable water.” The recent drought, he observes, “has thrown that need into relief.”

Indeed, the drought pushed the share of income devoted to water to 2.1% from 1.8% for households earning less than \$25,000, according to a survey released this year by the Pacific Institute; for those earning less than \$10,000, costs rose to 5.3% of income from

4.4%. “These households have little or no disposable income,” the report said, “so any increase in water costs poses a major problem.” Not only do those households have little wiggle room on spending, but they’re relatively unlikely to have options for reducing water use — they can’t cut back on lawn watering if they’re apartment dwellers, for example.

About one-third of the state’s residents, or about 13 million people, live in households with income below 200% of the federal poverty line, or \$49,200 for a family of four. In some rural and agricultural communities, the percentage is well above 80%. Those are the households most vulnerable to rising rates.

State officials have committed themselves to fighting for water affordability. A state law in 2012 established as official state policy every human being’s right to “safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water” — the first such state commitment in the nation. The enactment of AB 401 followed in 2015, instructing the State Water Resources Control Board to develop a program for water rate assistance for low-income households and present it to the Legislature by next Feb. 1.

Meanwhile, the PUC has become concerned about the wide variation in low-income assistance programs offered by the water companies under its jurisdiction. The PUC last month launched a rulemaking proceeding to examine them all and find ways to “ensure consistency” among them.

The fragmented structure of the state’s water delivery systems and the obstacle of Proposition 218 mean that rate relief will have to be delivered through a state program, and it will have to be a big one. “If California does enact such a program, it would be out in front,” says Max Gomberg, who is overseeing work on the options at the state water board. “No other state has done this.” The board, working with the Luskin School, has worked up several options and has aired them at a series of local hearings. The next two sessions are scheduled for Monday in Sacramento and Wednesday at Los Angeles City Hall.

The options include providing every household earning below 200% of the poverty line with a 20% discount on their water bill; giving those households tiered discounts ranging from 20% to 35%, depending on the size of their bills; or limiting the 20% discount to eligible households not yet served by private utilities with or without PUC-mandated lifeline programs. The total cost of the programs would range, in Luskin’s estimate, from \$277 million to \$619 million a year.

Those are all cheaper than the electricity lifeline, which costs \$1.3 billion a year, or the telephone lifeline, which comes to \$723 million. But it would almost certainly have to be funded by a general statewide tax. That would make the program subject to Proposition 13’s requirement of a two-thirds vote in each house of the Legislature.

Another issue will be determining who among the eligible population actually pays water bills and how much. More than electricity or phone bills, water bills often are paid by landlords, who pass the costs on to tenants as part of the rent. That means the relief may have to be delivered via a straight subsidy to eligible households, based on the assumption that it will help to defray their implicit water charges.

The trend in water costs over the last couple of decades indicates that the problem is bound to get worse. That's partially because of bad choices.

“One big-picture solution is not to invest in overly expensive water sources” such as desalination, which far outstrips the cost of water recovered via conservation and recycling, the Pacific Institute's Feinsein says. “Having to pay for a huge desalination plant that isn't necessary will really burden low-income residents.”

Another solution is to stay on top of maintenance. Water infrastructure is deteriorating all across America, and Californians know how costly the consequences can be. The break in a Department of Water and Power water main on Sunset Boulevard caused \$13 million in damage to five buildings, several athletic fields and two garages at UCLA in 2014. Fixing things before they break will be much cheaper in the long run, for the water systems and especially their neediest customers.



## When is the **best time** to water?

### Water **early** for the best results.

Watering in the early morning (between 4 a.m. and 8 a.m.) saves money and water, while keeping your grass, plants and trees healthier.

Watering early when the sun is low and winds are calm:

- Helps reduce water loss from evaporation due to heat and wind.
- Improves soil absorption so water and nutrients get to plant roots, where it's needed most.

Remember, no watering between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. in the LVMWD service area. Visit [www.smartirrigationmonth.org](http://www.smartirrigationmonth.org) for more smart ideas to save water and dollars.

[www.smartirrigationmonth.org](http://www.smartirrigationmonth.org)



## ***Pick Up Free Recycled Water Saturday***

The Las Virgenes Municipal Water District is offering free recycled water every Saturday from 8 am to 1 pm.

Use water more efficiently and use the recycled water for gardening and yard purposes.

Save on your own water bill and help the environment as well!

Participants must take a training session before picking up water. Sessions are offered the second Saturday of each month.

The water is available

at the Rancho Las Virgenes Composting Facility at the corner of Lost Hills and Las Virgenes Roads in Calabasas.

To register for a training class visit [www.LVMWD.com/RWFS-Training-Registration](http://www.LVMWD.com/RWFS-Training-Registration).

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## Pick Up **FREE** Recycled Water this Saturday



Use water efficiently and stay within your water budget by using **free** recycled water in your yard.

Available each Saturday  
from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

### **Rancho Las Virgenes Composting Facility**

Corner of Lost Hills and Las Virgenes Roads in Calabasas  
More details at [www.LVMWD.com/RecycledWaterFillStation](http://www.LVMWD.com/RecycledWaterFillStation)

*First time participants must attend a training session available the **second Saturday** of each month.*

*Registration required.  
[www.LVMWD.com/  
RWFS-Training-Registration](http://www.LVMWD.com/RWFS-Training-Registration)*



**Open to customers of Las Virgenes Municipal Water District  
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