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State awards rights to capture mountain storm flows Decision boosts regional drought survival strategy

SAN BERNARDINO/RIVERSIDE, CA – October 20, 2009 – Drought survival in western Riverside and San Bernardino counties took a giant leap forward today as a state agency approved permits for two regional water agencies to capture massive storm flows from local mountains that would otherwise be lost to the ocean.

The State Water Resources Control Board granted preliminary approval for Western Municipal Water District (Western) and San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District (Valley) to capture up to 198,000 acre-feet of previously unallocated storm water runoff behind Seven Oaks Dam in the San Bernardino Mountains. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, builders of the flood control facility, have been working cooperatively with Western and Valley districts since 1990 to maximize beneficial uses of the stormwater. The application for the water rights proposes using the water for groundwater recharge, storage and direct delivery to local water agencies. The Santa Ana River Water Rights project is one of the largest water right applications approved in the state of California.

The state decision awards new water rights to the water rights holders in the San Bernardino Basin. The wholesale agencies, Valley, which has 72 percent of the rights, and Western, are court-appointed watermasters of the Bunker Hill and Lytle Creek groundwater basins and share responsibility for maintaining the integrity of those basins. The remaining 28 percent is exported to Western's general service area in western Riverside County.

The new rights enable the districts to capture water from the Santa Ana River and four tributary streams behind the Seven Oaks Dam. This means that during periods of high runoff, Valley District and Western would be able to capture the surplus water that flows down the mountain past the collection and diversion pipelines of other agencies.

“These water rights enable us to do what residents of western Riverside and San Bernardino counties expect us to do in an era of increasingly scarce water supplies, and that is to capture and store as much runoff as we possibly can from our local mountains, particularly during wet years,” said Pat Milligan, board president of San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District.

Tom Evans, Western's board president, concurred. “These rights create a precious new water supply for the Inland Empire,” he said, adding that the additional water that Western and Valley District capture and store as a result of these rights will help mitigate the effects of drought and court-ordered cutbacks in water imports from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. “This type of successful partnership enhances opportunities for more partisanship actions that benefit the residents and businesses throughout the Inland empire region.”



(more)

Water Rights,
continued
on page 2

Inland Empire officials support Valley District and Western in their pursuit of new water rights.

“We have certainly been in support of their application and are anxious for it to be approved,” said Robert Martin, general manager of East Valley Water District in Highland. “I think the awarding of the permit and the approval to begin conserving water behind the Seven Oaks Dam offers us the ability to capture high flows in wet years and put that water to beneficial use, whereas in the past it’s been lost.”

The new water rights could also improve the capacity to maintain a vibrant regional economy for future generations, said Rich Haller, chairman of the Highland Planning Commission, citing his own community as an example. “Obviously, economic stability in Highland and any other community is impossible without stable water supplies. Capturing water behind the Seven Oaks Dam is a tremendous benefit for Highland because it increases our water supply reliability. That is key to meeting existing and future demands.”

According to the state’s decision, the goal of the new water rights is to enable Valley District and Western to capture large flood flows, which seldom occur. “Stream gage records show the highly variable nature of Santa Ana River flows, with large floods and long periods of extremely low flows,” the state said in its decision, adding, “The actual amount of water available for diversion and recharge, therefore, will vary greatly from year to year.”

The ruling also states that Valley District and Western have a right to “divert, pump, extract, conserve and use all surface and groundwater originating in the upper basin without interference from lower basin claimants.” Valley District and Western plan to use their full allocation of water from these rights for groundwater recharge and to meet direct delivery demands of their respective customers.

Both Valley District and Western are legally required to maintain the integrity of the Bunker Hill and Lytle Creek groundwater basins, which are naturally recharged by stormwater runoff from the San Bernardino Mountains. This new supply will help manage water resources in the region in an era when water imported from the Northern California Bay-Delta is increasingly unreliable due to court-ordered mitigation of endangered species.

The 13 water agencies that serve a 350-square mile area stretching from Rialto to Yucaipa now collectively require at least 30,000 to 60,000 acre-feet of imported Delta water each year to satisfy the needs of their 700,000-plus business and residential customers. That’s roughly 15 percent of their collective water needs.

Valley District was formed in 1954 as a regional agency to plan a long-range water supply for the San Bernardino Valley. It imports water into its service area through participation in the State Water Project and manages groundwater storage within its boundaries. Valley District’s customers include 13 retail water agencies from Rialto to Yucaipa, which collectively have more than 700,000 business and residential customers. Valley District’s 350-square mile service area spans the eastern two-thirds of the San Bernardino Valley, the Crafton Hills, and a portion of the Yucaipa Valley and includes the cities and communities of San Bernardino, Colton, Loma Linda, Redlands, Rialto, Bloomington, Highland, East Highland, Mentone, Grand Terrace and Yucaipa.

Western was formed by the voters in 1954 to bring supplemental water to growing western Riverside County. Today, the District serves eight retail and nearly 25,000 wholesale customers with water from the State Water Project and the Colorado River, as well as groundwater, to its 527-square mile service area that has a population of more than 825,000. As a member agency of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the District provides supplemental water to the cities of Corona, Norco, and Riverside and the water agencies of Box Springs Mutual Water Company, Eagle Valley Mutual Water Company, Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District, Lee Lake Water District and Rancho California Water District. Western serves customers in the unincorporated areas of El Sobrante, Eagle Valley, Temescal Creek, Woodcrest, Lake Mathews, March Air Reserve Base and Murrieta.

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