



John Rossi, general manager of Western Municipal Water District, sat down with Brown and Caldwell Senior Vice President Cindy Paulson to talk about the "new water ethic," the Chino desalter project and the water-energy-economy nexus. This interview is available exclusively to *BC Water News* readers, and is the type of content you receive free with your subscription. Read and enjoy.

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10 Minutes With ...

John Rossi

What do you see as the greatest challenges and opportunities in California water today?

Clearly, it's having enough water for the future and trying to connect with our customers to help them understand that water is a precious resource. The cost of water is going up, and here in Southern California we need to look for local ways to reduce the dependence on both the Colorado River and Bay Delta systems. So, we're looking at recycling, stormwater capture, water use efficiency, groundwater cleanup and desalting of brackish groundwater to get the benefits of local supply and supply diversity. Additionally, there's the value related to the water-energy nexus. We use a lot of energy to move water, especially from the Bay-Delta. We can decrease our carbon footprint as we reduce our energy usage by using more local water resources.

We hear a lot about the "value of water" in different contexts. I wear two hats — as both a wholesale and a retail water provider. I think the challenges are even greater on the retail side. Managers are on the front lines of trying to help people understand the challenges with providing reliable water and why their rates keep increasing. We may be the victims of our own success. We have the greatest



Name: John Rossi

Title: General Manager, Western Municipal Water District

Background: As general manager of the 527-square mile Western Municipal Water District, John Rossi is responsible for the planning, direction and management of water, wastewater and recycled water activities and operations for the District that serves nearly 1 million

standards in the world for water quality and for water service reliability. People often don't understand what the costs are to get high-quality water to their doorsteps every day.

What do you see as the top priorities for your agency over the next few years? The next decade?

Like many agencies, we've done an integrated resource plan and have looked out 30, 40 years for our future water supply. When I started at Western in 2004, things were really busy in terms of development in the Inland Empire, and it's only a matter of time until that happens again. Having a reliable water supply for that growth has us focused on the supply diversification.

Recycling and stormwater capture are two very important initiatives for the District. We've made significant improvements with our own Western Water Recycling Facility, but we're also working regionally with agencies on their own recycled plans. Many have done master plans for the next 20 or 30 years. As for stormwater capture, we worked 20 years to get a water rights permit from the state board for stormwater captured from the Santa Ana River behind the Seven Oaks Dam. In 2009, the Water Board granted a permit for up to 200,000 acre-feet a year. We will take water coming out of the San Bernardino Mountains, put it back in the groundwater basins or use it directly. We want to store the water so we can deal with dry period peak demands going into the future.

The permit was a big deal. It was a partnership with the San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District and benefits many of the agencies in San Bernardino and Riverside counties. That's one of the things our District, our board, really believes in: To think regionally and collaboratively. The days of one pipeline here, one well there, one project on your own, are gone. It doesn't make sense, especially when funding opportunities at the state and federal levels are much more limited.

Beyond the water supply question, going forward we really need to think about how we provide our services. We've been transforming ourselves in the way we do business, investing in technology and training the workforce to provide more support as a regional provider of water and wastewater services. We want to assist other agencies that might be smaller or need help because they're being squeezed on the revenue side. Having the kinds of programs in place

residents. He is a court-appointed Watermaster for the Santa Ana River surface water and Western groundwater judgments. Western is a member agency of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority (SAWPA) and the Western Riverside Council of Governments (WRCOG).

Rossi is a board member for the Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA) and vice president for ACWA's Region 9 Board. He is the second vice president of the WaterReuse Association and the president of the California Utility Executives Management Association. He is also a board member of California Baptist University Board of Visitors and the University of California, Riverside Water Science & Policy Center. In addition, he serves on the California Municipal Utilities Association Board of Governors. He previously served as an elected member of the board of directors for the Rancho California Water District in Temecula.

Before he joined Western, Rossi was chief executive officer of the Chino Basin Watermaster and general manager of the Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District.

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to get the maximum value out of the ratepayers' dollar is important to Western.



Chino desalter project

What do you see as your agency's greatest accomplishments in the time you've been there?

In order to do the kind of projects we really need to do, especially in an area that's growing, we need some financial assistance from our federal and state partners. So, like other districts, we've embarked on working with state agencies, USBR, USACE and Congress and have been fortunate to secure additional funding. Most recently, Western and our partners received one of the largest grants ever awarded by the California Department of Public Health. A \$51 million grant that helps expand the [Chino Desalter](#), an estimated \$130 million project. It's a partnership with Inland Empire Utilities Agency, the Chino Basin Watermaster, the Chino Desalter Authority and 15 agencies, water districts and cities in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

This project cleans up the groundwater basin, but it does something unique in California: It uses a code section called [Maximum Benefit](#), which allows us to combine different water resource strategies, like salt removal through the desalters, stormwater capture, source blending and recycled water programs to protect water quality in the river. This type of project also allows for recharge at higher levels of nitrate and salts in the ground from recycled water while removing salt by way of the desalters. It's a regional pro-active water resource

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program, which is the next evolution in water resource management. A win-win for customers and ratepayers.

How does your agency, as a Metropolitan member agency formed specifically to import water to your area, work to diversify your water supply?

It's a challenge, similar to what we face with water use efficiency. Shortly after the 2007 smelt decision, Metropolitan and much of the state went into water shortage allocation. It was a good reminder that these kinds of diversification projects benefit not only the member agencies, but also all of the Metropolitan service area. When local projects come online, there's an amount of water available for others that may have a greater need. As a member agency, we help our customers not only with our own diversification projects, but we work with Metropolitan to help other agencies with recycling and desal because those projects benefit all those agencies in Southern California that are connected to Met's wholesale system.

How would you describe the phrase "new water ethic"?

It's about the water professional and probably, more importantly, about the retail water customer, thinking about water as a precious resource. What does that mean? We can't waste water anymore. Waste has so many different aspects to it. For example, when people over-apply water on their lawns, they're not only using expensive water that had a lot of energy to move it from great distances, but also often picking up chemicals that can run off and create other problems in the environment.

We've taken steps at Western, with our water budget methodology for setting rates, that says to people, "Use the water you need, but if you waste water, you'll need to pay more because it costs more." This new ethic makes sense to our customers – with more than 86 percent of them in budget. People get upset about a water rate increase, and I don't blame them. But we often ask them, "How much is your cable bill? Is your cell phone bill twice as much as your water and sewer bill? Is your electric bill three times more." Put in this context, customers often respond that the other utilities are desire but water is critical.

Why is it important to use the term "efficiency" rather than conservation?

"Conservation" implies shortage, while "efficiency" is a more pro-

active term. Use the water you need, certainly, but just like you try to do with your own household budget, we want to use that water carefully, efficiently. Efficiency is a term that people can get their arms around and take a more active role in rather than being told, “Don’t use as much.”

I understand you were recently awarded a significant grant for work on hexavalent chromium treatment. Tell us a little about that and what you are doing to address it.

One of the benefits of collaboration in regional projects such as the Chino Desalter Expansion is that the desalter system is large: It has two treatment plants, a series of 21 connected walls, and both influent and effluent piping that allows the water to be cleaned and provided for beneficial use. One of the benefits of the large treatment system is that we have a good method for cost-effective treatment including for contaminants like Chrom-6.

There are many stakeholders and agendas in California water resource management today. How do you think we can take the biggest steps forward together?

There are so many different, competing interests and if we aren’t careful, we can find ourselves looking to gain by way of other agencies’ losses. Sometimes we do ourselves and our customers a disservice by not being able to bring stakeholders together and find common solutions in terms of water resource expansion, water quality improvements and the efficient use of our supplies.

We’ve got to stop competing against each other and find common goals. Grants and other funding are tighter and less available, so we have to be that much more effective and efficient. It’s not good to use taxpayer dollars on lawsuits fighting with each other; rather we must work to find the common ground.

One of the things we’re really proud of here in the [Santa Ana River Watershed](#) is developing task forces and forums for people to sit down and find solutions to our challenges. The work is not easy, inexpensive or quick, but time and time again we see people finding solutions together. In the past four or five years, we’ve branched out beyond the water-wastewater folks and are talking with the environmental community and others. We learn about their issues, expand our thinking, and find multiple benefits in doing projects together.

If you could change one thing about California water policy, what would it be?

I would like to see more interaction and balance between water supply and the water quality regulations. We have a public perception problem that doesn't coincide with the science. We forget, as public agencies or as regulators, we're here to serve the same people. This is all about balancing the public's need for quality water at an appropriate cost.

What's something people might be surprised to know about your agency?

One of the things people are not often aware of is the role of court-appointed [watermaster](#). We work with three large wholesale water agencies to account for and report all the water that runs down the Santa Ana River. That can be from 150,000 acre-feet in a dry year to 600,000 acre-feet in a wet year. We also work as the court-appointed watermaster on the San Bernardino groundwater adjudication. These basins benefit several million people in the Inland Empire.

What's the one thing you can't live without at work?

Staff. I couldn't do anything without our talented and committed staff doing all the wonderful work that they do. On a more personal level, I enjoy technology and the ability to have a smart phone, a tablet or a laptop to obtain and use information. Being able to stay in contact with people and information is critical today.

What's the most significant project you've been involved with in your career?

Earlier, I mentioned the Maximum Benefit project in the Chino Basin. Now, Western is the lead on the desalter expansion project, which relies on the skills and abilities of engineers, scientists and policymakers working on a basin plan amendment that was unopposed at every level. It's a new and unique approach. I think people will look back 30, 40 years from now and see it as a major benefit for the region.

What's on your to-do list?

I've had the benefit of working with some smart and fascinating people in my career. I really enjoy getting out and helping other

managers. I'm looking to develop networking opportunities for the sharing of ideas, staff, mentoring and coaching, and helping to develop the next generation of utility managers. These people will be the general managers, decision makers and creative thinkers for the future.

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