

The Big Water Mess

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By Brenda Adelman

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SCWC Declares Critical Water Shortages While Holding Meetings on Increased Water Allocations

Critical water shortage alerts have bombarded us in the media lately. Mother nature was scaring us good until a few weeks ago, when the winter rains finally poured down and reservoirs started to fill. Not enough, said County Water Agency staff who alerted everyone to the critical need for stringent conservation even while the crisis diminished. They plan to ask the State Board to declare a state of emergency that would allow the Agency to limit Guerneville flows to 35 cubic feet per second, (normally at least 125). At those flows, there would be no lower river recreational season this year and a great deal of environmental harm could occur.

Ironically the Water Agency recently held six formal hearings around the County on a proposed project intended to increase the amount of water they could withdraw from the river. They recorded public comments on the 3000-page Water Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR) that few people knew about or read. At the Guerneville, Santa Rosa, and Sonoma meetings, there were fewer citizens attending than Agency staff present, even though the Agency claimed extensive publicity had occurred.

The public comment period for the complicated 3000-page Water Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR) recently ended. The Sonoma County Water Agency failed to act on a request to extend the comment deadline even while claiming at a recent meeting that responses to comments are not likely to occur.

According to General Manager Randy Poole, the Agency has no funds to move forward on this project. It is unheard of that an Agency would go through an expensive and time-consuming environmental review process, take comments, and then refuse to respond. Thousands of staff hours and huge amounts of money have been spent on this document, and making such an announcement before the comment deadline may have been just a ploy to throw the public off guard. It's hard to make a major effort on something that may be a total waste of time though it's still important to get concerns into the record. If few people respond, it would make it much easier for them to utilize the document for future projects.

It is also true that this EIR process began many years ago in a very different climate when new growth and inflated housing values provided an unending bonanza for local government. Since then, things have been unraveling quickly. Housing prices are plummeting and many people are stuck with mortgages that far exceed the current value of their homes. Suddenly government is faced with giant shortfalls in revenue and are cutting back wherever feasible.

Water Project Background

There are eight major water contractors who buy water from the Sonoma County Water Agency (Windsor, Santa Rosa, Cotati, Rohnert Park, Petaluma, Sonoma, Valley of the Moon, and North Marin Water District). They have legal contracts with the Agency to provide them with certain water allocations as long as water is available. During drought periods the contractual allocations get cut way back and the contractors need to

rely on conservation and local supplies (usually groundwater) to provide as much as half of their supply. There are many power games that get played by both sides in the course of negotiating terms.

The Agency has a permit from the State Water Board allowing them to withdraw up to 76,000 acre feet a year (AFY), from the Russian River at various points. (Each acre-foot has about 325,000 gallons. 76,000 AFY is about 25 billion gallons.) For the last fifteen years the Agency has been trying to get that amount increased to 101,000 AFY to no avail. (In fact, previous documents assumed they would get this amount, and much of the growth in the Santa Rosa plain was based on that assumption.) This current EIR is the most recent attempt to obtain this increased allocation.

Project Components

There are three main components to the proposed project: advanced conservation, infrastructure improvements on the South pipeline to Petaluma and North Marin, and a potential pipeline down Dry Creek to bring Lake Sonoma water into the Russian River for water supply diversions. We have no problem with the first two and believe they should have been addressed separately. (The pipeline to South County and North Marin is in very bad shape and may be a disaster waiting to happen.)

It is the latter project that is the most problematic, both because it would be extraordinarily expensive and politically difficult to build and because it flies in the face of Federal directions in the Biological Opinion needed to save the threatened salmon and steelhead in our Russian River. Those directions require that the Agency first spend ten to twelve years improving habitat in Dry Creek in order to provide favorable conditions that would allow them to release the flows needed for water supply while still protecting the threatened fish. Many feel this will not work and don't want to wait that long to start planning the pipeline, which is likely to take at least that long to get built. It's a quagmire, especially when many property owners on Dry Creek don't want to cooperate with any of these agencies.

Needless to say, the situation is even more complicated by extensive water use by wineries and other property owners, some of whom have their own water rights, yet many are guilty of illegal water diversions because there is a fifteen year backup in the State Board's water permit allocations and little enforcement. There is nothing to be lost by simply taking the water.

The complexities of the Eel River diversion and the Potter Valley Project involve power generation by PG&E, and Native American water rights, have resulted in 33% less water being delivered to Lake Mendocino, from which most of our supplies come, and further complicates the situation.

Some water contractors are thinking about revising their growth ambitions. At a recent community meeting, Rohnert Park Council member Jake MacKenzie told citizens that government should focus more on conservation and not on large expensive pipeline projects. Rainwater harvesting, retention basins, some groundwater use, and fixing leaky pipes are beginning to look a lot more attractive. For some of us, that's music to our ears.

Permanent flow reductions in lower river may be required

The Biological Opinion also demands that flows in the lower river be permanently lowered in order to maintain a closed river mouth at Jenner to supposedly improve estuary habitat for the fish. This issue and others will be discussed at an important

meeting in Guerneville on March 18 (Vets Building) at 6:30 PM. The National Marine Fisheries Service is calling for permanent flow reductions in the lower river. This March 18th meeting is extremely important if you are concerned about this issue. You can call Brad Sherwood at 547-1927 for more information about the meeting. We urge you to attend.

Russian River Watershed Protection Committee is an independent nonprofit corporation funded mostly by individual private donations. You can contact us at rrwpc@comcast.net if you have questions or want to be on our supporter list.