

Water Supply Issues in the Santa Ynez Valley

From WE Watch Newsletter, August 2019

Within WE Watch, a Water Issues Group is tracking water issues in the Santa Ynez Valley (SYV). Our focus has mainly been on water supply rather than other aspects of water management. We want to share what we see as current water supply issues relevant to the SYV.

1. Cachuma Project Water.

The U. S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR), which owns and operates Cachuma Reservoir and Bradbury Dam, has a contract with the Santa Barbara County Water Agency which in turn has subcontracts with Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District Improvement District #1 (ID#1) and four water providers on the south coast. ID#1 is the only SYV water provider that has an allocation (10.31%) of Cachuma water. USBR's contract expires in 2021, so it is drafting a new contract. USBR but has not yet shared a draft, nor set forth a process for public involvement or determined whether an Environmental Impact Report will be prepared.

WE Watch hopes a new contract will address several key issues including: ensuring ID#1's allocation; addressing steelhead management; clarifying the County Water Agency's role; and ensuring adequate downstream releases for water rights holders.

2. Santa Ynez River Flow and Underflow.

The SY River flows when there's enough rainfall to generate surface runoff and when there are releases from Lake Cachuma. Even when there is no visible surface flow, there is water underflow within the river bed. ID#1, Solvang and Buellton have water rights allowing them to tap into this underflow with wells that provide a portion of their water needs.

A key issue for the City of Solvang is whether it will drill new wells into SYR underflow. The City has run into concerns raised by various parties, including: ID#1, a private land owner, the State, and a federal agency. **Another key issue for all water providers is: what relationship, if any, exists between SYR underflow and nearby groundwater basins.**

Both the SYR's surface flow and its underflow are enhanced when USBR releases Cachuma water downstream. These releases can occur for various reasons, such as: (1) when the reservoir level is nearing capacity and/or a storm is predicted; (2) to provide water for steelhead habitat; and (3) when downstream water rights holders acting through the SYRWCD request releases consistent with their entitlement to Cachuma water. The SYRWCD, *which is a separate entity from ID#1 and is not a water provider*, represents water rights holders along the SY River from Cachuma to the Lompoc Plain. **SYRWCD's role in requesting releases, and the basis for those requests, might be specifically addressed in USBR's new Cachuma contract.**

3. Groundwater (aquifer) Basins.

All water providers in the SYV rely on groundwater for part or all of their water supply. Buellton, Solvang and ID#1 have groundwater wells in upland basins separate from their riverbed underflow wells. Unlike other water sources in California, groundwater was not regulated until

2014 when the CA legislature passed the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). Under SGMA, the entire SY Valley has been divided into 3 sub-areas for purpose of planning and analysis. The Western Management Area is centered on Lompoc; the Central Management Area on Buellton; and the Eastern Management Area encompasses Solvang, Santa Ynez and surrounding areas. Each area is required to develop and submit a groundwater management plan by January 2022. The planning effort is being led by SYRWCD in coordination with water providers, local cities, the SB County Water Agency, private well owners, the Chumash Tribe, and others.

WE Watch is monitoring this SGMA planning effort which is getting underway in the SY Valley. At this early stage we are alert for issues such as: transparency of the planning effort; whether a thorough and data-driven analysis will be conducted; how data will be shared with the public; ensuring citizen involvement; and how decisions will be made for managing groundwater.

4. Imported Water from the State Water Project.

The State Water Project (SWP) has transported water via aqueduct and pipeline from northern California to Central Valley farmers and to Southern California for many years. In Santa Barbara County most major water providers also began to import this water in 1997 after forming the Central Coast Water Authority (CCWA) to manage pipeline construction and water delivery. Lompoc residents voted to not buy into the SWP. The residents of Buellton, Solvang and areas served by ID#1 voted to participate in the SWP thereby giving them an additional water source. In the SYV, only Buellton and ID#1 are members of CCWA, while Solvang purchases its SWP water through ID#1.

Current key issues facing CCWA members include: whether to help pay for the proposed tunnel to transport SWP water through the Bay Delta by agreeing to a new 50-year contract between CCWA and the CA Department of Water Resources; whether the County should continue to have a contractual role to play in SWP issues; and whether to purchase an increased allocation of SWP water.