



Opinion

WE Watch studying issues of SYV water supply

By WE Watch
Contributed

Within WE Watch, a Water Issues Group is tracking water issues in the Santa Ynez Valley. 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.

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 No. 1 (ID1) and four water providers on the South Coast. ID1 is the only SYV water provider that has an allocation (10.31 percent) of Cachuma water.

USBR's contract expires in 2021, so it is drafting a new contract. USBR 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 ID1's allocation; addressing steelhead management; clarifying the County Water Agency's role; and ensuring adequate downstream releases for water rights holders.

Santa Ynez River Flow and Underflow:

The Santa Ynez 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. ID1, 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 the underflow. The city has run into concerns raised by various parties, including ID1, a private land owner, the state, and a federal agency. Another key issue for all water providers is what relationship, if any, exists between the underflow and nearby groundwater basins.

Both the river's surface flow and its underflow are enhanced when USBR releases Cachuma water downstream. These releases can occur for various reasons, such as when the reservoir level is nearing capacity and a storm is predicted; to provide water for steelhead habitat; and when downstream water rights holders acting through the Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District (SYRWD) request releases consistent with their entitlement to Cachuma water.

The SYRWCD, which is a separate entity from ID1 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.

Groundwater (aquifer) basins:

All water providers in the SYV rely on groundwater for part or all of their water supply. Buellton, Solvang and ID1 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 legislature passed the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). Under SGMA, the entire SY Valley has been divided into three 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 the way decisions will be made for managing groundwater.

Imported Water from the State Water Project:

The State Water Project (SWP) has transported water via aqueduct and pipe-

line 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 not to buy into the SWP. The residents of Buellton, Solvang and areas served by ID1 voted to participate in the SWP, thereby giving them an additional water source. In the SYV, only Buellton and ID1 are members of CCWA, while Solvang purchases its SWP water through ID1.

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 state 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.

The purpose of WE Watch is to educate the people of the Santa Ynez Valley about environmental issues, and to engage in activities including collaboration with other organizations that sustain and improve the environment of the Santa Ynez Valley. Visit www.we-watch.org to learn more. The views and opinions expressed by WE Watch are their own.