

# Voices

SUNDAY

OCTOBER 19, 2014



## DRUNK ON RAINFALL

One of our elected officials recently suggested that we stop watering our lawns. So it would seem that the elected official is blaming the water users for the water shortage? Others who blame the fish in the Santa Ynez River for the South Coast's lack of water are equally misinformed. The water shortage is not due to the overuse of water, nor is the Endangered Species Act the problem, and it is not really the drought. It is a lack of planning on the part of the water officials, and bad judgment on the part of the voters.

The current water shortage can be traced back to the 1980s. Whether it was to control growth, or to keep water rates low by deferring the cost of infrastructure, or a way to get

the voters to approve a ballot measure to bring state water to the South Coast, South Coast water agencies refrained from developing necessary new water resources for a decade.

**Michael F. Hoover**

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The problem was that the water demand was slowly increasing throughout the 1980s, and water supplies were not. Then along came a seven-year drought. Rainfall was above average for only one year from 1984 to 1991. Water year 1990 was the third driest year in 123 years. The voters had had enough. They voted for both state water and the city's desalination plant. It was to be a very foolish and costly decision, but one brought on by the chronic water shortages of the previous seven years.

As it turned out, the South Coast entered a 20-year wet cycle right after the vote. From

1992 to 2012, cumulative rainfall was 40 inches above average. The people running the city got drunk on the "free" water from Lake Cachuma, and shut down the desal plant. In addition, the city and the other water districts failed to maintain significant aspects of their emergency backup supply — the water wells that pump water from underground basins. They also shut down the tertiary treatment plant that had been providing treated wastewater to the golf courses and parks.

So, as we sit here today, three years into the next drought, multiple aspects of the South Coast's diversified water portfolio are unusable. The water basins are underutilized because of a lack of pumping capacity, the desal plant is still years away from reopening, and at

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# Local water officials, voters to blame

## ■ HOOVER

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least one tertiary treatment plant is offline. So the only way to solve the water shortfall is to force the water users to use less water.

Santa Barbara has experienced droughts, like the one we are now experiencing, four times in the last 70 years. So it's not really the weather that is at fault. We should have sufficient water supplies to avoid water rationing during the three- to seven-year droughts that are common to our geographic area.

And we can't really blame the fish in the Santa Ynez River. The water releases for the fish end up replenishing the wells downstream from Lake Cachuma. By and large, the riparian water users along the Santa Ynez River have water rights that are superior to the South Coast's rights, so they are entitled to the water released for the fish.

The South Coast has been "unsustainable" with respect to water since the early 1900s. The initial water shortage was tempo-

rarily solved when the Montecito Water District built a dam on the Santa Ynez River, allowing Montecito to send water from the Santa Ynez Valley through mountain tunnels to the South Coast. The city of Santa Barbara followed suit with Gibraltar Dam a few years later; Bradbury Dam was built in the 1950s, creating Lake Cachuma. But by the 1970s, even the water from the Santa Ynez River could not sustain the South Coast, so in 1992 we began the importation of water from Northern California. Yet less than 20 years later, we experienced renewed water shortages. And it is only going to get worse.

It's time that the South Coast deal with its chronic water shortages. And the solution is not to steal yet more water from another far-off place. Keep in mind that coastal cities in California have many water supply options, but in most cases the farmers in the Central Valley, who grow our fruits, vegetables and other foods, have only one option — the streams and rivers that the South Coast and other cities deplete

through the importation of water.

The South Coast lies adjacent to the largest body of water on earth, the Pacific Ocean. It's time the South Coast and other coastal cities move away from the expensive and unreliable water supplies from Northern California in favor of desalination. If we do so, we will find that desal water is less expensive than state water, that the quality of the desal water is better than treated wastewater, and that desalinated seawater is far more reliable than any other source.

So why have the water districts neglected the desal option? It's because once the voters committed us to state water, water rates would have risen even more than they did if we had kept both the state water and desalinated water options active. So the water purveyors (wanting to get re-elected) shut down the wells and the desal plant, and hoped for rain. And it did rain, for 20 years. Now that time has ended.

The water agencies know what my computer models tell me — we must have a water supply that

is two to three times greater than we need in average rainfall years in order to avoid shortfalls during drought. Unfortunately, the water agencies have decided to have "planned shortages" instead of a reliable water supply. In doing so, they have neglected their duty to provide a safe and reliable water supply to the public.

Future water shortages may well extend for decades. These shortages can only be solved by integrating the desal plant into our annual water supply portfolio. This may temporarily raise water rates above historic levels, but the tiered rate system, similar to the one we now have for both water and electricity, will allow low water users to have manageable monthly costs. Larger water users may be paying the current high monthly rates, but at least they will get the water they are paying for, rather than experiencing penalties, fines and rationing.

After we get the desal plant online, we need to sell our state water allotment; it's been the most expensive mistake the voters and public officials have ever made.