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STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD DELIVERS NEW WATER RIGHTS PERMITS TO INLAND EMPIRE WATER AGENCIES

The final permits, issued after the State Board authorized their issuance last fall, provide San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District and Western Municipal Water District with the Inland Empire's largest new source of water since the development of the State Water Project.

The permits result from a 40-year effort by Valley District and Western to develop new water supplies to replenish local groundwater basins.

"This is a wonderful day for the people of the Inland Empire."

— Pat Milligan, President, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif., July 5, 2010 – It's official.

The State Water Resources Control Board has issued new water rights permits to San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District (Valley District) and Western Municipal Water District, which provide surface water, groundwater and imported water to utilities and water agencies throughout the Inland Empire.

The significance of the permits, issued eight months after the state board announced its decision to support the two agencies' water rights application, will be discussed during a meeting of the district's board of directors at 2 p.m. Wednesday at the district's headquarters at 380 E. Vanderbilt Way in San Bernardino.

The permits authorize the two agencies to capture up to 198,000 acre feet of previously unallocated Santa Ana River storm flows that would otherwise be lost to the ocean. Valley District Board President Pat Milligan said his agency and Western have been working for more than 40 years to develop this new water supply to replenish local groundwater basins.

"This is a wonderful day for the people of the Inland Empire. We've come a long way," Milligan said, adding that the permits enable the Valley District and Western to capture what amounts to the largest supply of new stormwater developed since the California Water Project.

He said the two agencies were able to obtain these new water rights because of the strategic water management role they play in the Inland Empire. Unlike local water retailers, which deliver water directly to homes and businesses, Valley District and Western are wholesalers that supply other agencies with whatever water they need to supplement their own supplies.

A 1969 court settlement involving agencies throughout the Inland Empire also requires Valley District and Western to maintain the integrity of the entire San Bernardino groundwater basin in addition to providing local retailers with whatever water they need to supplement their supplies.

In the old days, natural runoff from the San Bernardino Mountains was enough to recharge local groundwater basins. But as the Inland Empire's population and water demands have increased, Valley District and Western have increasingly had to purchase imported water supplies to recharge local groundwater basins.

Fortunately, Valley District and Western reserved the right to develop and claim any new water that the agencies could develop in the Upper Santa Ana River Watershed without negatively affecting the allocation guidelines set forth in the 1969 settlement agreement. This is why the two agencies have opposed flood control facilities that lacked significant water storage components or that otherwise interfered with groundwater recharge efforts.

In the 1970s and 80s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers focused on two projects: Improvements to Prado Dam, near Corona; and the building of a 223-foot high, 3.5-mile long earthen dam in Mentone, which would serve as Orange County's first line of defense in the event of heavy rains and flooding.

It was Valley District General Manager G. Louis Fletcher who led the opposition to the Mentone Dam. Valley District officials led the opposition to Mentone Dam, not only because it would be an enormous eyesore, but because it was to be built right on top of critical water percolation basins that Valley District and other water agencies use to recharge local groundwater basins.

Using the detention basins for flood control purposes would invite excessive silting, which would eventually clog up the basins and reduce their effectiveness. Building a dam in Mentone would, therefore, provide Orange County with flood control protection while depriving local agencies of their ability to recharge local groundwater supplies.

But Fletcher didn't limit his focus to simply finding another place to build a flood control project for Orange County. He looked at the Santa Ana River from a strategic perspective and saw it as a crucial water resource for Inland Empire agencies. He also believed that the focus on flood control was short sighted and that what was really needed was a dam that helped capture drinking water for use by local agencies in addition to providing flood control protection for cities downstream.

Fletcher hired consultants to search for alternative dam sites that would serve both water conservation and flood protection needs. Through Valley District's efforts, three other potential dam locations in the San Bernardino Mountains were identified, one of which eventually became the site of the Seven Oaks Dam.

Convincing the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to change its plans was no easy task, however. He hired consultants, lobbied members of Congress, and worked closely with other local agencies, including the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District, East Valley Water District, the cities of Redlands, San Bernardino and Loma Linda, as well as the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors to persuade the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to adopt his way of thinking. After an intensive, multi-year effort, Valley District and its water district partners convinced the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build the Seven Oaks Dam instead.

This was a critical achievement, not only because it provided local agencies with a means to increase their ability to capture runoff from the local mountains, but because it set the stage for Valley District and Western to obtain additional water rights permits that it received this week from the State Water Resources Control Board.

“It’s taken us 41 years to obtain these new water rights,” Milligan said. “But given California’s increasingly problematic water situation, I think everyone in the Inland Empire would agree that this has been time well spent.”

San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District was formed in 1954 as a regional agency to plan a long-range water supply for the San Bernardino Valley. It imports water into its service area through participation in the State Water Project and manages groundwater storage within its boundaries. Valley District’s customers include 13 retail water agencies from Rialto to Yucaipa, which collectively have more than 700,000 business and residential customers. Valley District’s 350-square mile service area spans the eastern two-thirds of the San Bernardino Valley, the Crafton Hills, and a portion of the Yucaipa Valley and includes the cities and communities of San Bernardino, Colton, Loma Linda, Redlands, Rialto, Bloomington, Highland, East Highland, Mentone, Grand Terrace, and Yucaipa. For more information, please contact Douglas Headrick at (909)387-9226 and visit www.sbvmd.com.