

Water brings leaders together

*This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press
Thursday, January 31, 2008.*

By ALISHA
Valley Press Staff Writer

SEMCHUCK

LANCASTER - Water providers, cities and county government must unite to solve water issues in the Antelope Valley.

That was the consensus reached by members of the Lancaster City Council as well as Randy Williams, Lancaster's director of Public Works; Russ Fuller, general manager for the Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency; Curtis Paxton, assistant general manager for Palmdale Water District and interim general manager for the Antelope Valley State Water Contractors Association; Adam Ariki, assistant division chief for Los Angeles County Waterworks Districts; and Robert Neufeld, general manager for Rosamond Community Services District.

The group participated in a workshop focusing on Valley water issues Tuesday night in Lancaster City Council chambers.

"Ensuring water supply for the future is like using sunscreen: If you wait until you need it, you're too late," Williams told a crowd of more than 70 people, including Norm Hickling, field representative for county Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich.

It's been a "good week for me to watch rain come down," Lancaster Mayor Henry Hearn said. "We need three or four more" storms like that.

"Water is such a complex issue - as complex as public safety," said Mark Bozigian, Lancaster's interim city manager. "We need correct information."

A decision that benefits one situation can adversely impact another issue, he said.

Certain decisions carry economic significance that can affect the construction trade, Bozigian noted.

Those types of decisions include water purveyors' placing a moratorium on will-serve letters - the agreements between water suppliers and developers.

From the perspective of all water suppliers in the Valley, "we do have a problem," Williams said. And that problem will affect our future."

Williams talked about the near- and long-term challenges, saying the suppliers must find ways to balance water demands with water supplies.

He called for a campaign "to unite the Antelope Valley" in participating in solutions such as water conservation measures. "It's going to take all of us."

"Randy has keyed this up well," Fuller said. "It's going to take a lot of teamwork to get us where we need to be.

"Ten years ago," Fuller said he would have talked about "all the plans we have to increase the water supply in the Valley." But in the last five months, the situation has grown more dire.

Fuller pointed out it's not only an Antelope Valley problem, but it involves regional challenges. "I mean the Southwestern United States. We're connected hydrologically."

That connection once was considered an advantage but now poses "a real challenge" as all areas compete for the same water, Fuller said.

"I want all of you to leave knowing the gravity of the challenges we face."

The first regional challenge centers on the water supply that comes from Northern California.

"We have droughts and we have floods. That's what we have to work with," Fuller said.

Severe drought hampered the water supply in the mid-'70s. Then in February 1982, enough water flowed out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in one month to supply water for 10 years.

The problem in the Antelope Valley: There was nowhere to store that water, so local suppliers couldn't take it to the bank - the water bank.

A severe three-year drought hit in the '90s, Fuller said.

A second challenge has to do with the Colorado River water supply.

Fuller said when the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California "loses water from there, they take more water from the State Water Project," which lowers the amount of water available in that system to other State Water Contractors.

The third challenge involves the city of Los Angeles, which lost 30% of its water supply from the Owens Valley. That increases competition for water, once again impacting the State Water Contractors, Fuller said.

Of course, delta smelt, a species of fish found in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, added to the water woes because their death by pumps in the State Water Project, had environmentalists screaming foul, and a judge agreed to save the smelt and stop or slow down the pumps. That meant less water coming to Southern California.

Furthermore, Fuller said, "We failed to manage our local water supply."

Based on findings from the U.S. Geological Survey, the Antelope Valley Groundwater Basin was overdrafted by 8 million to 9 million acre-feet of water. An acre-foot equals 325,851 gallons, enough to supply the average single-family Valley home for a year.

"We're praying for a quick fix," Fuller said. "I'm not real optimistic."

Paxton said what affects one water district is really regional. "We all face the same issues."

The challenges, Paxton said, will increase the cost of water. Not only that, but the Palmdale Water District covers an area that spans 46 square miles and extends to about 75th Street East in Palmdale.

Projections indicate the Palmdale district, with its 26,500 customer connections, will have a demand of 30,000 acre-feet of water in 2008. But the district's entire entitlement from the State Water Project is 21,300 acre-feet, when the state Department of Water Resources says they can take 100% of that entitlement.

So far this year, the state agency only is allocating 25% of the entitlement to State Water Contractors, forcing them to search for water from other sources.

On top of that, Paxton said, the "next big issue facing us is water supply for new development."

There has been a lot of finger-pointing between water suppliers and land-use agencies - the cities that handle planned development. Litigation is forcing them to work together, Paxton said.

"But we should be able to sit down to the table together," he said.

Waterworks District 40 currently gets 61% of its supply from the State Water Project through AVEK, Ariki said. Only 44% of the supply will come from the State Water Project by 2030.

During normal rainfall years, Waterworks District 40 could get about 70,000 acre-feet of AVEK's entitlement, but in a drought year like 2007, that amount is reduced significantly.

The current groundwater adjudication case could result in decreased supply for the county water supplier, Ariki said, referring to a legal battle between Valley carrot growers and water purveyors that has been going on for nearly a decade.

At this time, Waterworks District 40 has put a hold on will-serve letters, Ariki said.

"Every day I get calls from developers asking for will-serve letters. As a retail agency, we have a responsibility to supply water to those who ask for it."

The big problem is how to supply water that's not there.

Neufeld discussed the merits of a water banking project in Kern County that Rosamond Community Services District has entered into with the Semitropic Groundwater Banking Program and Western Storage and Development, a private firm in Los Angeles.

That group is trying to persuade Valley water suppliers to partner in the project, but the area's agencies are contemplating the costs.

Although no one from Palmdale's city government attended the workshop, Leon Swain, director of Palmdale's Department of Public Works, said the absences were merely a matter of scheduling conflicts.

Swain and Gordon Phair, a Palmdale engineer, said they agreed with the consensus that everyone must work for the common cause.

"The effort over the last year and a half is really unprecedented,' Swain said, referring to the meeting of minds among municipal, county, state and federal agencies who worked on the Antelope Valley Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, a tool aimed at identifying solutions to the Valley's water shortage.

"We've never come together as a region to address this topic and solicit input from everyone as thoroughly as we have with the Integrated Regional Water Management Plan," Swain said. "The city of Palmdale has been supportive of this effort from the very beginning."

asemchuck@avpress.com