

# S.J., EAST BAY REVIVE WATER-SHARING PLAN

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January 07, 2013

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January 07, 2013 12:00 AM

Is 15 years long enough to open minds?

Once more, San Joaquin County and a major urban water supplier are discussing a plan to put the Mokelumne River's precious flow to better use.

In wet years, the East Bay Municipal Utility District would send river flows to farmland somewhere in the east county, where the water would percolate into the ground to revive depleted aquifers.

## Sharing water

How a plan to share groundwater with the East Bay Municipal Utility District might work:

- In wet years, East Bay MUD's aqueduct from Pardee Reservoir would deliver Mokelumne River water into a pipeline feeding local farms. Water would percolate into the ground or be injected into wells.
- In dry years, East Bay MUD could pump some of that stored groundwater back up and into its aqueduct for delivery to the Bay Area.
- The benefit for San Joaquin County would be bolstering its sagging groundwater levels. The benefit to East Bay MUD would be a more reliable supply of water for 1.3 million Bay Area residents during droughts.
- The location of the groundwater bank would depend on agreements with willing landowners.
- If a small pilot project is successful, the concept could be expanded. More details are expected in about one year.

Then, in dry years, the utility could take some of that water back and send it to 1.3 million customers in the Bay Area.

It's that last part that caused so much fuss in 1998, when a formal proposal was overwhelmingly rejected by local interests.

Folks in San Joaquin County don't like the idea of shipping any more water to big cities.

But officials on both sides say both parties can benefit, and that it might be time to try again.

"If this project is successful and we're able to expand and implement it on a larger scale, I think this could go a long way toward improving the conditions in our basin," said Fritz Buchman, deputy director of the county's Public Works Department.

East Bay MUD officials said relationships and attitudes have improved in the past 15 years.

"You're seeing, hopefully, an optimistic early sign of a project coalescing. It's rising from the ashes," said Richard Sykes, the utility's director of water and natural resources.

For now, this is only talk. No site for storing the water has been identified and it's unclear where the money might come from.

One hurdle will be a county ordinance that forbids the export of groundwater unless a permit can be obtained. That could leave the fate of any future proposal in the hands of the county water commission - which voted 11-3 to block the 1998 proposal - and ultimately the Board of Supervisors.

Officials say no permits have ever been issued under the export ordinance, which was designed to prevent a raid on groundwater from outside agencies.

Tom McGurk, a farmer and the chairman of today's water commission, said that perhaps cooperation has improved since 1998.

There is a "new urgency," he said, as landowners continue to pump more water from underground than is replenished naturally by rain. This "overdraft" has caused groundwater levels to drop, jeopardizing future water supply and quality.

"We've got to start banking water," McGurk said. "The question is, can we get over this jealousy thing and trust that these water districts are going to put together something bona fide, that's not going to hurt us?"

The San Joaquin Farm Bureau Federation strongly opposed the 1998 plan. A spokesman said last week that the group has not yet taken a position on the latest discussions and is waiting for more details.

There will be differences between this plan and the one rejected years ago, Buchman said.

The goal this time is not only to store water for use during dry years, but also to have a "tangible" impact on groundwater levels.

Also, the county would oversee the project and how it is operated, he said. East Bay MUD could be a partner or a customer.

"The concept is, whatever might leave the county for East Bay MUD would be less than has been put (into the ground) - significantly less," Buchman said.

Water attorney Dante Nomellini, who voted against the 1998 plan as a commission member, said the latest proposal appears to be a "softer approach" that might be more acceptable to the community.

Other recent plans to export water from the Valley to urban areas - such as the Modesto Irrigation District's proposal last year to sell water to San Francisco - have generated controversy. But Nomellini said this effort is different.

"The concept, I think, is OK because it would be bringing in additional water that we wouldn't otherwise get," he said, adding careful analysis will have to be done to make sure the pumping doesn't cause more harm than good.

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