

Groups get together to solve Valley's water woes

This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press on Thursday, June 14, 2007.

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PALMDALE - Unless water purveyors and governmental entities throughout the Antelope Valley take preventive measures, the water supply will not support life in this region by 2035.

In an effort to avoid such a fate, the Antelope Valley Regional Water Management Group, a network of water agency and government representatives, reviewed a draft plan Wednesday morning meant to increase the Valley's water supply, improve water quality, protect the environment, increase open space and maintain a hardy wildlife habitat. The plan, which will be published for public viewing and comment July 2, also considers flood control issues and encourages land-use planning to ensure suitable and managed population growth in this region.

Components of the plan came together after nearly a year of input from Water Management Group members, including people from Los Angeles County Waterworks Districts, the lead agency; the county Department of Public Works; the county Sanitation Districts; Palmdale and Lancaster; and area water purveyors such as Palmdale Water District, Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency and Littlerock Creek Irrigation District.

The plan, which will be updated every two years, is seen as a necessary element in the pursuit of grant funds from the state and federal governments. Specifically the group is eyeing grants from Propositions 50, 84 and 1E - all water-related dollars.

"We followed a systematic approach," Ken Kirby, a consultant and meeting facilitator, told the group of 50 or so participants gathered at the Palmdale Cultural Center. "We call it steps collaboration.

"When we're done with the plan, the real work begins," Kirby said.

The draft, which won't be final until after the public has an opportunity for comment, contains 10 sections beginning with an introduction that details the background of the region, tells how the plan was developed and identifies the goals.

Before efforts began to create the plan, "individual water purveyors and users were actively studying the effects of recent accelerated development of the region and attempting to identify appropriate actions to address the growing pressure on water services," the draft document states. "The recent acceleration of industrial and

residential activity stimulated demand for both more water, and higher quality water.

"Attempts by individual agencies to meet the growing challenges were frequently criticized and the atmosphere was one of mistrust, with fierce competition among water users for limited water supplies," according to the draft document.

The document describes the Valley as 2,400 square miles of desert, bounded by the San Gabriel Mountains to the south and southwest, the Tehachapi Mountains to the northwest, and "a series of hills and buttes that generally follow the San Bernardino County Line to the east," an area defined as a closed groundwater basin, which prohibits the flow of water to outlying regions and also prevents new water from entering except via the California Aqueduct or when it rains.

Groundwater is limited because of overdrafting of the basin, meaning people in the early days pumped too much water from the ground.

A section on issues and needs in the document highlights the sources of water in the Valley, reliability concerns, the use of recycled water and challenges.

The document also includes sections on objectives, water management strategies, the evaluation of projects along with a priority list and a framework for implementation.

A list of priorities showed an Amargosa Creek recharge and channelization project, an Antelope Valley water bank and an aquifer storage and recovery project for water supply management; a 42nd Street East sewer installation, a Palmdale power project and Lancaster Water Reclamation Plant expansion for water quality management; a 45th Street East flood control basin; a Quartz Hill storm drain for flood control; and a host of other projects.

The impetus behind this project is to keep from running so low on water supply by 2035 that residents will be forced to vacate the area.

"There was really one point to the plan, that was action. This really is a 20-year overview," Kirby said.

He received some positive feedback from people who attended many, if not all, of the 15 stakeholder meetings to date.

"This process for me has been very rewarding," said Adam Ariki, assistant division chief for L.A. County Waterworks Districts. He envisioned people relying on this plan 20 or 30 years down the road. "I look at the study done by (Department of) Water Resources 30 years ago."

Randy Williams, Public Works director for Lancaster, said the interaction among the individuals to come up with a plan "has moved everyone to a closer trust of each

other," compared to years past. However, he added, when they leave the meeting, they seem to go back to their individual concerns. "We need to focus on how this continues to be a pressing issue."

Neal Weisenberger, vice president of the Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency board of directors, said it "will take longer to develop a plan for governance," another stage in the Regional Water Management process. Although the group has worked harmoniously so far, he speculated talks "could break down at that point."

"We've been pleasantly surprised," said Brian Dietrick, a project engineer with the Sanitation Districts. "Our only concern: What happens when the money isn't there?"

Kirby said most of the comments considered the process successful, adding, "we need to move forward." The group must maintain the momentum and have the approved plan completed by the Aug. 1 deadline for Prop. 50, Phase 2 grant funds, which requires that the plan be reviewed by the public for 30 days prior to submission.

Kirby reminded the group that if adjudication over groundwater rights "isn't settled, you can't move forward with the plan. The adjudication is a key piece for your ability to implement the plan."

A public meeting is slated at 7 p.m. Tuesday, July 10 in the Joshua Room at the Palmdale Cultural Center, 38350 Sierra Highway. A second public meeting is set for 7 p.m. Wednesday, July 18 at the Rosamond Community Services District, 3179 35th Street West.