

Water supply vital, Mojave chamber reminded

This story appeared in the Antelope Valley Press on Monday, July 2, 2007.

By ALISHA SEMCHUCK
Valley Press Staff Writer

MOJAVE - Pitchers of water and iced tea were served at last week's Mojave Chamber of Commerce lunch meeting, along with reminders of the fragile water situation facing Californians, an issue that is even more pronounced in the Antelope Valley.

"Water is very important," said Bill Deaver, a member of the chamber's board, at the Thursday meeting.

That's why the business organization invited Melinda Barrett, water conservation manager for Los Angeles County Waterworks Districts, and Claud Seal, engineer and assistant general manager for the Rosamond Community Service District, to address the problems and potential solutions throughout the Valley.

Seal and Barrett described the Antelope Valley Integrated Regional Water Management Plan and its implications, explaining the importance of a collaborative effort from all Valley communities - which could make the difference between receiving grant money from the state or not.

"We've been involved in this process going on two years now," Seal said. In that time, he's watched "a big evolution" from people who initially showed little to no interest in participating in a unified effort to secure Valleywide water to those same people "getting involved" in the cause.

Though the Valley stretches across 2,400 square miles of desert in Los Angeles and Kern counties, access to water is pretty much limited to its boundaries. Seal defined the Valley as a closed basin, where the only sources of outside water come from rain and "surface water that comes down the aqueduct."

He talked about the imbalance: a limited water supply of groundwater; the lack of reliable imported water, which became apparent with the recent

10-day shutdown of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta pumps that send water into the aqueduct; water quality issues; and insufficient storage capacity.

The imbalance, Seal said, comes from too little water, "but more and more users." Given the dry year and the delta issues, suppliers believe there is enough water to "last throughout the summer," Seal said.

Water quality issues include levels of arsenic in the groundwater found in areas of the Valley, plus other contaminants illegally discarded by irresponsible businesses.

To solve the storage shortage, Seal said, the Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency has already purchased about 1,400 acres of farmland near Rosamond for a proposed water bank.

"We're also working with a private company, Western Development (and Storage), to start a banking program. So there are entities trying to develop sooner (rather) than later. Everybody wants water. Everybody expects to have water. We have developers come in," Seal said, and they, too, ask for water.

Challenges largely involve funding. No one has the money needed to fix the problem. That's where state grants would help.

Currently, the stakeholders participating in the Integrated Regional Water Management Plan are vying for a grant from the state through Proposition 50, Round 2 funds. If the group succeeds with its request, the Valley can receive somewhere between \$12 million and \$25 million, he noted.

Barrett said a draft of the grant request has been prepared, and will be released for public review on July 2. Then the public will have 30 days to offer input. Public hearings will be conducted before the grant request is submitted to the state.

At this time, Barrett and Seal have been making the rounds, speaking to community groups throughout the Valley to summon support. Each community faces distinct concerns, Barrett pointed out.

At Three Points, fire protection topped the list. Without sufficient water, wildfire season poses a huge threat.

At Boron, arsenic levels give cause to worry.

Leona Valley has been "very active, looking at projects to harvest storm water," Barrett said. "Growers in that community have employed new high-tech sprinklers - weather-sensitive sprinklers - to irrigate their vineyards."

Barrett and Seal urged the Mojave folks to join the cause. They explained that the Valley stands a better chance of getting the nod of approval for a state grant as an entire region, rather than as individual entities.

As Seal put it, "We want to get as many people as possible."

asemchuck@avpress.com