

San Joaquin County's water policy: Is there anyone in charge?

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For nearly a decade, some county water leaders have been trying to strike a deal with the mighty East Bay Municipal Utility District for a groundwater banking project.

The project could provide a much-needed jolt of groundwater to recharge the aquifer below the Lodi area.

But it hasn't happened.

Water managers and insiders say the groundwater banking idea is one in a series of opportunities that has -- or is -- passing the county by. The reason: No one, it seems, can agree on anything.



Water flows through the Woodbridge Dam. The dam is operated by the Woodbridge Irrigation District, which recently agreed to sell a portion of its river water allotment to Lodi. ([Jennifer M. Howell](#)/News-Sentinel)

"Getting everybody on the same page with water in this county is very, very difficult," said George Barber, a water authority and former San Joaquin County Supervisor. "There are many different opinions, many different points of view."

The county, say county water experts, is fractured several different ways:

Urban versus rural.

Giant agencies against smaller ones.

Districts and cities that use groundwater versus those that use river or Delta water.

Developers against environmentalists.

It's a political and financial welter that has put the county at a disadvantage when it comes up against a force such

as East Bay, which represents 1.2 million customers and has a budget in the hundreds of millions.

Some water leaders, though, remain optimistic.

Mel Lytle, who was hired by the county in early 2002 as water resources coordinator, says he doesn't know what the fuss is about regarding the political stalemates on water issues that have plagued San Joaquin

County.

"I've been here a year and a half, and I haven't seen that," Lytle said. "I haven't seen a more open, willing-to-discuss group of people than I've seen in any type of circumstance."

A checkerboard of interests

With seven cities, 22 water and irrigation districts and the county government regulating San Joaquin County, it has been virtually impossible for the county's diverse interests to agree on how to manage its complex water system.

"It's unbelievable the web we have woven," said Kevin Kauffman, general manager of the Stockton East Water District.

A major factor in the county's water squabbles is its diverse topography, said Rich Prima, Lodi's public works director.

Farms in the north and east ends of San Joaquin County rely on a depleting groundwater table, while the west is dominated by the Delta, a massive waterway that collects from such rivers as the Sacramento, American, Cosumnes and Mokelumne.

When it comes to the world of water, San Joaquin County is really three counties rolled into one -- the haves, the have nots and the in-between, Kauffman said.

The Escalon, Ripon, Manteca and the Tracy areas are among the "haves," because they have a plentiful amount of water from the Stanislaus River and good groundwater, Kauffman said.

The Delta has less in water entitlements than the Tracy-Manteca area, even though a large amount of water flows through the Delta, Kauffman said.

Then there's the "have nots," which have a continually depleting water table.

Kauffman classifies that as the Lodi area and most of San Joaquin County east of Highway 99.

Negotiations, not lawsuits

Is it possible for the varied interests to get along?

"I don't know that yet, but I know we're going to try," said San Joaquin County Supervisor Jack Sieglock, of Lodi, who serves on the county's Water Committee with Supervisor Dario Marengo.

"And I'm going to do my best to foster that."

Conflicts, both within San Joaquin County and statewide, can arise for different reasons, said Randy Kanouse, a lobbyist for East Bay whose office is a half-block from the State Capitol in Sacramento.

The conflict can be Northern California objecting to Southern California wanting the north state's water,

Kanouse said.

Or it can be agricultural interests against urban interests. Should California's precious water supply be used for booming subdivisions and the businesses that serve them, or should the priority be to farmers who put food on the tables of all Californians?

Or it can be cities, counties and water districts that have abundant water rights against those who lack those rights.

As East Bay's liaison to San Joaquin, Calaveras, Amador and Alpine counties the past three years, Gerald Schwartz said his role is to try to get the disagreeing parties to work out compromises on water policy.

"I try to get the right people to the table," said Schwartz, 57, who lives in Herald. "Filing lawsuits at each other doesn't provide water."

Ed Steffani, manager of the North San Joaquin Water Conservation District, isn't sure if the different county factions can come together.

"The Delta guys want water running through the Delta," Steffani said. "It's a nightmare. You couldn't find a more complicated problem if you tried."

For some, the East Bay groundwater proposal is the most current example of the stalemate.

East Bay has proposed developing improvements in San Joaquin County to store 20,000 acre-feet of Mokelumne River water during wet years that is now flowing through the Delta to the Pacific Ocean. The idea was that East Bay would be entitled to tap into 1 acre-foot of the new water for every 2 acre-feet it puts into the local groundwater basin.

Groundwater banking a bust?

But the proposal hasn't gotten anywhere because some interests oppose sending any water out of San Joaquin County.

"This is water that is going into the ocean anyway," said Steffani, who supports East Bay's proposal. "They're afraid EBMUD will suck us dry."

Stockton attorney Dante Nomellini, who represents homeowners, farmers, marinas and duck clubs in the Delta since 1972, blames East Bay, referring to it as "an 800-pound gorilla."

The problem wasn't the issue of East Bay taking up to 10,000 acre-feet during dry years for its residential and commercial customers in the Bay Area, Nomellini said.

The biggest problem was that East Bay may have wanted to keep the water underground in San Joaquin County for 20 years, then pump out its annual share and transport it to the East Bay, he said.

Had an agreement been reached, it would have depended on the contract language between the county and East Bay whether the Bay Area district could take a cumulative amount of water, said Mike Tagnolini, a senior

civil engineer for East Bay.

East Bay would guarantee that local farmers and property owners in San Joaquin County would not be harmed by any water deal, said Tagnolini and Schwartz.

"There's lack of good information on where water would go," Nomellini said. "Let's say East Bay puts in water in Lockeford. Twenty years from now, that water in Lockeford might be in Stockton."

Watkins, the Farm Bureau president, says farmers don't oppose an East Bay groundwater banking project as long as farmers' interests are protected.

The Farm Bureau opposed East Bay's groundwater proposal, but Watkins declined to state why.

All water interests in the county must be involved in the development of a groundwater banking plan, which is expected to be completed in about a year, Lytle said.

That will be no easy trick, though, as some entities are heavily in favor of the banking program and some adamantly opposed to it.

Many unaware of shortage

It is hard to get parties to agree on a solution if they don't agree there is even a problem. And that, too, is the case in San Joaquin County.

Steffani, the North San Joaquin district manager, said many people don't realize how acute the water shortage is because the problem has taken decades to evolve.

But Joe Salzman, general manager of the Lockeford Community Services District, doesn't see any major problem in his district.

"We have four wells. Our pumps are not going as deep as the wells are going," said Salzman, whose district provides domestic, sewer and irrigation water for Lockeford.

"We check the wells every few months," Salzman said. "They vary from 125 feet to 137 feet, depending on the time of year. It hasn't gotten bad for us."

Steffani replied, "He's not concerned because he's used to those numbers."

At Tully Road and Highway 88 in downtown Lockeford, Steffani said, the water table sank from sea level in 1976 to 30 feet below sea level in 1998.

"If you wait another 30 years, it will drop another 30 feet," he said.

And that doesn't count Lockeford Oaks, the 307-home subdivision that has been approved by San Joaquin County. Steffani estimates that Lockeford Oaks, to be built northeast of Brandt and Jack Tone roads, will require at least 200 acre-feet of water a year.

"(Salzman) is saying there's no problem right now," Steffani said. "He's right."

Schwartz, the East Bay liaison, suggests the lack of awareness goes back many years.

Schwartz recalls moving with his family in 1950 to southwest Lodi, where his parents operated a dairy on Harney Lane.

"My dad used to say, 'We could almost dig to the water with a shovel,'" Schwartz said. "It wouldn't have hit anyone's agenda that we needed any water."

There is reason for guarded optimism.

Several projects are planned or suggested to slowly replenish the groundwater basin in eastern San Joaquin County.

One, by the San Joaquin district, involves flooding two pieces of farmland on the Mokelumne River.

The project is contingent on property owners in the district approving a tax proposal that would charge property owners \$1 per acre annually. The fee would increase in \$1 increments to a maximum of \$5 per acre, depending on how much water the district is able to use from the Mokelumne River.

The other project is the Farmington Recharge Program, led by the neighboring Stockton East Water District. Stockton East officials, in conjunction with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, are looking for farmland to flood so that water seeps into the ground and into thirsty wells.

The Farmington program involves Stockton East and the Corps of Engineers negotiating a purchase, lease or easement acquisition with willing property owners. The target area is generally between Highway 99 and Jack Tone Road from Farmington to Acampo.

What's the solution?

Barber, years ago, saw the quagmire and proposed a way out of it: A unified, San Joaquin Water Agency to represent all interests. The agency would have spoken with a single tongue and carried the financial clout of a whole county, not just slivers of it.

"We even drafted some language on it, but it didn't move very far," he said. "Nobody wanted to give up their board of directors, or give up their fiefdom. It was really the tail wagging the dog."

A key to peace is more water, perhaps through a reservoir, said Kenny Watkins, president of the San Joaquin Farm Bureau Federation.

"One solution that is real easy is to provide more supply," says Watkins. "We're going to have to build a reservoir, and everybody has to get behind it."

That, though, could prove a Herculean task.

Environmental interests have all but killed interest from the Legislature in approving even small reservoirs,

water experts say.

Watkins countered, "Environmental interests want water, too. They want water for fish, and they want water for their habitat."

Nevertheless, water experts say it will take one step at a time to solve the county's water problems.

The North San Joaquin district attempted this year to transfer 50,000 acre-feet of what is now East Bay's water from the Mokelumne for North San Joaquin's use.

However, the California Water Resources Control Board denied the application, saying that it can't take away entitlements from one agency to benefit another.

Steffani argues that East Bay will have plenty of water from the Sacramento River once a major diversion project is completed near Freeport. East Bay officials maintain the Freeport water is for dry-year water only.

It would also correct what Steffani calls an injustice made in 1956, when the predecessor agency to the Water Resources Control Board decided that urban customers in the East Bay were more deserving of water than the rural North San Joaquin district.

State authorities assumed in 1956 that the Folsom South Canal would be built south from the American River to San Joaquin County. However, the canal was built only as far south as the now-idled Rancho Seco power plant. So northern and eastern San Joaquin County were left out in the cold.

Kanouse, the East Bay lobbyist, maintains that his employer is entitled to keep its Mokelumne River water.

"If I've owned a house for 50 years and someone says, 'You know, I owned that property before that house was built,' does the previous owner get the right to the house?" Kanouse asked rhetorically.

"It's our house, and our family depends on it," Kanouse said.