



## Eye on the environment: Water crisis is real; now is time to act

By Heidi Hayes

Guest writer

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It seems that we are facing one crisis after another: oil, housing, financial and, now, a water crisis. Although the word "crisis" is often overused, make no mistake that the water crisis is very real.

When Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proclaimed in June that California was officially in a drought, warning bells sounded at water districts around Ventura County. The drought is the latest in a series of recent water-related challenges that affect the cost of the county's water supply. Earlier this year, water availability from Northern California was cut almost 30 percent because of a court order to protect the endangered delta smelt in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The bad news continued Oct. 30 when the state Department of Water Resources announced that it could deliver just 15 percent of water agency requests for the State Water Project in 2009, a projection that marks the second-lowest allocation since deliveries were first made in 1962. In 2008, water agencies received 35 percent of delivery requests after an initial allocation of 25 percent.

Many Ventura County residents might not realize that a majority of our drinking water is imported from Northern California. This water makes a 445-mile journey to Southern California homes through a water movement system that relies heavily on high-cost electricity.

How does all this affect county water users? The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California provides much of Ventura County's drinking water through its local distributor, the Calleguas Municipal Water District. Given the perfect storm that the state now faces, Metropolitan Water will be forced to pass along increased water costs beginning in January to local water districts and ultimately to consumers.

Metropolitan Water has increased rates by 14.3 percent, while Calleguas will increase its delivery surcharge to local water agencies by 27 percent.

With imported water supplies dropping and costs rising, water districts in Ventura County are increasing the focus on developing local water resources.

Here is how one local water agency, the Camrosa Water District, is taking a multifaceted approach to reducing reliance on imported water:

n Increased use of recycled water for irrigation: Keeping outdoor landscaping looking lush comes with a price; about 70 percent of residential water usage is outdoors. Instead of using expensive drinking water from Northern California for landscape irrigation, Camrosa has made a great deal of progress developing its recycled water resources to keep landscapes green.

Leisure Village in Camarillo is in the third phase of retrofitting its piping and water system to use recycled water to irrigate its greenbelt. In addition, since 1990, Camrosa has reduced its drinking water sales to agriculture by 37.5 percent by replacing that water with locally recycled water.

n Expansion of local well development: Another means to reduce dependence on water from Northern California is to increase development of local groundwater supplies. Currently, Camrosa pumps drinking water from four district-owned wells and is refurbishing or developing three additional well sites. By developing local water resources, Camrosa has reduced its purchases of imported drinking water since 1985, from 88 percent to 72 percent, even as demand for water increased.

n Investigation of desalination: Much of the water obtained from local wells is too brackish or salty to be suitable for drinking. Currently, imported water is blended with local well water to create tap water. Camrosa is researching the development of local desalination facilities that would purify non-potable water for drinking.

n Investment in long-term solutions: Local water rates must increase to cover both the increases passed along by imported-water distributors and the necessary investment in infrastructure that will deliver the long-term self-reliance essential to a sustainable water supply in Ventura County.

*On the Net:*

<http://www.bewaterwise.com>

<http://www.calleguas.com>

<http://www.camrosa.com>

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