

Water Issues Divide Residents of Two Counties

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SPECIAL TO THE CALIFORNIAN*

There's a storm brewing in South Monterey County, but this one doesn't contain any water. Actually, a great part of it is about a lack of water. I have learned a couple of valuable lessons over the past decade: don't believe everything you hear, and there are always two sides to every story. These lessons were certainly proven true after a week-long vacation to Oak Shores at Lake Nacimiento with a family from Pacific Grove, which has become somewhat of a summer tradition.

We paid for this home probably seven months ago, and it was at the end of July when, much to our chagrin, we heard (they in P.G. and we in King City) that the lake was dried up. I can tell you first-hand this rumor is false. The lake, according to a year-round resident Leslie of Oak Shores, hasn't been dry since the drought of 1990. She told us rumors have been escalating for years, because the lake is - and always has been - an agricultural reservoir and water is let out. The residents of Monterey County, she said, will vote on this issue in November.

The lake is filled by rainwater only, and Monterey County uses the water to help keep the saltwater from intruding into the Salinas Valley. Adding to the problem is the lack of rain this past year. A year ago, 16 inches of the precious stuff was measured at Lake Nacimiento. A mere 8 inches have been measured so far this year. The Nacimiento Regional Water Management Advisory Committee, a nonprofit organization based in San Luis Obispo County, is suing the Monterey County Water Resources Agency for failure to adequately address the effect the Salinas Valley Water Project will have on the environment of San Luis Obispo County.

The suit is a result of the project's proposed lowering of Nacimiento Lake by as much as 28 feet, funneling that water into the Salinas Valley in an attempt to prevent saltwater intrusion. While not dry, lake levels are alarmingly low. Lake Nacimiento is at 33 percent of its capacity. The advisory committee, which includes Lake Nacimiento residents and property owners, advises local governments on water use. Committee president Jim Marshall said lowering the lake's level would damage the habitat of animals, including bald eagles living near the lake, endanger local drinking water supplies and harm the summer tourism economy.

Escalera said the habitat is her biggest concern. "You are talking about ruining the habitat, not just for the wildlife, but all kinds of different birds, including the bald eagles and blue herons," she said. "There is a huge loss of income, from the tourism to those who live and work here, but that is not really the priority, and neither is recreation. It's the wildlife."

The project calls for increased releases of water from both Lake Nacimiento and Lake San Antonio. The Monterey County Board of Supervisors approved the environmental impact report for the project June 4. Plans include building a seasonal dam on the Salinas River near Marina and making changes to the Lake Nacimiento spillway. Rob Johnson, MCWRA's chief of water resources planning, spoke Wednesday at a Rotary Club meeting in King City.

"This is really one project in two locations," he said. "We can't do one without the other. The project has a price tag of \$25 million, which would be funded through assessments to Salinas Valley landowners. Proposition 218 will appear on the November ballot. The figures are not worked out yet, but property owners (fees) will be based on paying for the amount of benefit they receive. In other words, northern landowners will pay more because they will benefit more, but we have not figured out the ration and actual numbers yet."

The project is essential, he said, to control flooding, as this is predicted to be an El Nino year. Johnson said the Nacimiento Dam and the related Nacimiento and San Antonio lakes were created, funded and operated by Monterey County for water supply and flood control decades ago. Any other activities that have been developed around the lakes must be considered secondary. Johnson insisted the impacts to water surface elevations and related recreational uses will be affected more by weather factors in drought years and not as a result of county operational practices. "Basically, they are letting our precious rain water flow out to the ocean," Escalera said. "And hurting our wildlife at the same time."

"The environmental impact report (EIR) was passed by the Monterey County Board of Supervisors. Everything was mitigated in the EIR," said Johnson. "We acknowledged the wildlife issue at that time. The report was certified to be OK." According to a rotary member at Wednesday's meeting, the proposed projects are necessary to modify the spillway in case of a higher level of water, and to build a rubber and steel dam at the mouth of the Salinas River to percolate water underground. If the proposition is not approved, the state may have to take over the problem that could result in meters on wells, which could be very difficult on agricultural landowners.

I don't pretend to know all the facts about this issue, but I recognize it as very important to all involved. It appears to me to be a two-sided, two-county battle. Stay tuned.

POLLY KENNEDY is a longtime southern Monterey County resident and journalist. Her column appears Fridays.