

WATER DEMAND, COST, AND IMPACT ON LAND USE DECISIONS **by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, January 2010**

Simple supply and demand models will tell you that water costs are going up because supply is going down. While a simple concept, the results of a decreasing water supply can be devastating. We're beginning to see a major shift in Southern California development patterns, industry, and our quality of life as a result of reduced water supply and increased water costs.

The agricultural industry is already suffering. The main water purveyor in Southern California - the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) - ended its discounted rates for farmers, and sharply increased their water rates. A typical farmer in Moorpark has seen water rates climb 81% in four years. Those not relying completely on MWD imported water find the costs of groundwater has equally increased as aquifers in Ventura County have been over-drafted, forcing up the cost of groundwater to levels equivalent to that of imported. In addition to the high costs of water, the agricultural industry is also faced with higher costs for fertilizer and heightened competition from world markets. As a result farmers in Ventura County and throughout the state need our support and buying local is one way to assist them.

Residents and businesses are also seeing their rates rise dramatically at a time when they can least afford it. Placed in tiers, those households that use more water pay higher per gallon rates than those using less. To deal with less water availability, MWD raised its rates by about 35% in two years and another 20% increase is projected in 2011. They have also required the agencies that buy their water to reduce consumption or face fines. Water agencies are trying to get the message to their end users (us) to cut back on our water use or see our rates increase even more than expected. They've also adopted future bans on filling swimming pools, washing cars, and watering lawns in anticipation of water supplies drying up further.

Some water agencies have tried to keep from passing on all of the huge water costs to their customers. Some have reduced staff and some have dipped into their reserves. Yet some water agencies have not been as diligent in cutting costs. For example, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors successfully spoke out against a proposed pension increase that MWD was proposing for its employees. After receiving our protest, MWD backed down. Other agencies, such as the Ventura Regional Sanitation District, have been marking up by as much as 30% their overhead charges that end up getting handed down to ratepayers. While operating costs are a factor in water rates, the exorbitant cost of water is due to the lack of supply.

LACK OF SUPPLY

Living in a dry climate, we have become dependent on water from the Sacramento Delta and the Colorado River. Due to a court order protecting the Delta Smelt, there has been a reduction in the amount of water that can be pumped from the Sacramento Delta. The Delta is also suffering from an inadequate levy system that can collapse in an earthquake and leave Southern California high and dry for years to come. Additionally, the drought has impacted the amount of water

delivered via the Colorado River and combined with the reduction of water from the Delta, Southern Californians are facing higher bills and less water availability.

An \$11 billion water bond measure will be on the ballot this year which promises to aid in the delivery and storage of water. The price tag will be a hard sell for voters as it furthers the State's indebtedness, the costs of which will be handed down to taxpayers and ratepayers for decades to come.

With higher costs and less water available to be piped in, municipalities are looking more seriously at recycling water, both for irrigation and for drinking. Projects such as toilet to tap, desalination plants, and reverse osmosis are all being proposed in our County as ways to clean and reuse water.

LOW IMPACT DEVELOPMENT

On a more local scale, new developments are being designed to capture rainwater on-site instead of conveying it to storm drains that carry it out to the ocean. Using cisterns to irrigate our gardens with non-chlorinated water, planting drought tolerant landscaping, and building biofilters to filter impurities from runoff and allow for the water to percolate into the ground and replenish aquifers, are examples of sustainable development design that reduces our dependency on expensive imported water.

Yet as Ventura County residents and businesses struggle to reduce their water use and pay their water bills, cities such as Camarillo and Oxnard are currently proposing to add thousands of new houses sprawling into adjacent farmland. Two projects alone - the Jones Ranch project in Oxnard, and the Conejo Creek project in Camarillo - will add over ten thousand residents to compete for the limited water allocations --water allocations that are anticipated to be further reduced in the near future.

Unfortunately, Southern California's water shortage isn't going to go away anytime soon, if ever. As individuals we can help reduce our households' and our businesses' demand for imported water. Hopefully our elected leaders will be responsible stewards and take actions to ease future water demand, not increase it.