A View of Future Statewide Water Issues

by Frances Spivy-Weber

Saving Mono Lake in the future will continue to depend on water—water for Mono Lake and water for Los Angeles. The Mono Lake Committee, through its members and friends, must continue to find cooperative solutions that protect the lake and meet the water needs of Los Angeles without the city having to go out and take water from other environments.

The cooperative solutions of the future will use and expand on the conservation and water recycling lessons we in the Mono Lake Committee have learned so far. But the challenges will be greater. Here is my short list:

1. Deteriorating water quality in both surface water and groundwater

More people in California means more pollutants flowing down gutters and polluting surface and ground water. Scientists are discovering the dangers of everyday items, such as aspirin, chemotherapy drugs, and birth-control pills accumulating in water supplies. Research also shows new dangers in known contaminants, such as possible developmental problems for babies drinking milk from bottles washed in water with trace amounts of perchlorate, a chemical commonly found in Colorado River water.

2. Reluctance or inability of agencies to lead governments toward integrated water and watershed planning

Integrated watershed and resource planning is complicated on many levels. For example, agencies and organizations have separate budgets and lines of authority, and they operate under different and occasionally conflicting laws.

3. Development patterns controlled by counties and cities, that damage future water supply and water quality options

Current law states that cities, counties, and water agencies must be sure there is water for large developments before they are built. Small developments under five hundred units, however, are not constrained. County and city planning guidelines are not required to address the damage development can have on water supply. For example, concrete is recommended for covering roads, driveways, parking lots, and channeled streambeds, even though rain cannot percolate back into the ground when it falls on concrete and sewer systems are often overpowered when it rains.

4. Climate change and other risk factors like earthquakes or terrorism

People must always plan for risks to water supply and water quality. Climate change scientists predict less snow and more rain in the future, including in Southern California. Earthquakes crack pipes and canals; an earthquake in the Bay Delta would severely damage water supplies used by 22 million Californians.

The magnitude of these issues is breathtaking, but there are knowledgeable leaders, including the Mono Lake Committee, pointing the way to short term solutions and offering sage advice about what people need to be doing now to prepare for 2030 and 2050.

Demand Reduction

To address all four challenges, a cost effective first step is to expand local and statewide urban and agricultural conservation programs. The logic is simple. If people, industry, agriculture, and the environment are expected to need "x" amount of water, we can buy time and flexibility locally and statewide if we can reduce that demand number by 10, 20, 30% or more.

After installing a low-flow toilet, how much more can someone do? The answer is, "Plenty!" At home, many people still need to put in new and improved water-saving devices. We can join the popular movement to plant native and California-friendly plants and be the first on the block to install new "smart" irrigation systems. Businesses, schools, and industries have these options and more. Restaurants can use water-saving spray rinse valves and steam trays; air conditioner cooling and x-ray processing can use recirculating water. Agriculture water efficiency can continue to increase through drip irrigation and crop shifts to plants that produce a higher value per unit of water, such as nuts and vines.

Increasing Investments in Local Water Supply Projects

It is hard to accurately predict when and where there will be an earthquake, how global warming will affect the Sierra and other parts of California, or what water quality horror we will find down the road. But it is easy to agree it is prudent to be prepared. If one source of water supply is cut off, it is smart to have other supplies as backup.

The Mono Lake Committee is working with others in several important water policy arenas to promote increased funding for decentralized projects that will make more water available to local and regional water agencies, particularly in times of drought or emergencies.

A companion to this effort is our support for integrated water and resource planning at the regional and watershed level with the goal of identifying where funding for a water project will also pay off in energy savings, improved water quality, and more water for the environment. For example, if LA could capture and safely use the 12 inches of rain that falls on it each year, the City could reduce its imports from the State Water Project by almost 50%.

The Mono Lake Committee's future water policy work will be growing and solution-oriented with a clear presence in Los Angeles. It will emphasize partnerships with environmental and community-based organizations, as well as agencies, that are pursuing our agenda locally or statewide. Mono Lake Committee members and their love for Mono Lake will be the heart of our legitimacy as water advocates. ❖