

# Opinion

Local Commentary · Castaic Lake Water Agency

# On the local water front



R.J. Kelly

Like many organizations, here at the Castaic Lake Water Agency we view the end of one year — and the beginning of the next — as a time of transition and an opportunity to take stock of where we've been and where we're headed.

Where have we been? If you'll pardon the expression, we've been navigating some pretty challenging waters.

Where are we headed? Toward a future in which Santa Clarita Valley residents will continue to benefit from a clean and reliable supply of potable water, in wet years and dry years alike.

This is the first of a two-part commentary, in which we reflect upon our efforts of the past year and outline our major goals and objectives for 2009.


Today we look at 2008, which was an especially challenging year for water agencies throughout California. CLWA is no exception in facing those challenges, but I'm proud to say CLWA has been exceptional in how well it has met them.

Under the forward-thinking leadership of our executive staff, our board and my predecessor as board president, Bill Peci, CLWA has been able to cope with drought and court rulings that have created uncertainty regarding water supplies delivered through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Here are some snapshots of these challenges as well as capital projects we tackled during the past year:

■ **The Whittaker-Bermite site cleanup:** Anyone who has followed local news over the past decade is familiar with the contamination of soil and groundwater at the site of the former Whittaker-Bermite munitions manufacturing plant. Decades of weapons testing contaminated several local wells with perchlorate, a rocket fuel by-product that has been linked to thyroid problems in humans.

In 1997, three local water retailers closed four contaminated wells to keep perchlorate from entering the water supply. In 2000, we and the three retailers pursued litigation



## Facing Challenges

### CLWA's Efforts in the Past Year

*A look at some of the key issues and accomplishments of the Castaic Lake Water Agency in 2008:*

- Major construction on treatment plant/pipeline for Whittaker-Bermite cleanup
- Court victories protecting SCV water supply
- New cooperative plan avoiding costly sewer plant upgrades
- Creation of multi-stakeholder integrated water resources management plan
- Completed design for expansion of Rio Vista Water Treatment Plant
- Completed construction of major pipeline on the east side of SCV
- Responded to state issues, including Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta court rulings
- Launched conservation outreach program

*Source: Castaic Lake Water Agency*

to force the former and present owners of the site to take responsibility for cleanup.

We negotiated a favorable settlement that has resulted in construction of pipelines and a treatment plant that will return two of those wells to service.

In 2008, we started and have made substantial progress on the construction, and I'm proud to say we have accomplished this with minimal inconvenience to motorists and nearby businesses.

■ **Success on the legal front:** We've achieved several significant court victories and other legal successes, including the settlement of litigation that had challenged the Santa Clarita Valley 2005 Urban Water Management Plan prepared by CLWA and the four local water retailers.

The trial court previously upheld the plan. However, the plaintiffs appealed and prolonged the litigation, only to abandon their appeal several months ago.

We've also achieved important trial court victories in defending against a pair of still-pending lawsuits by so-called environmental organizations that are trying to block CLWA from acquiring water that would help us continue to meet current and future needs.

The plaintiffs view water supply as a "hammer" they can use to control growth. We view these acquisitions — water transfers we've negotiated with other agencies —

as valuable and environmentally sound ways to help us meet the valley's water needs.

So far, the courts have agreed with us and have continued to uphold our legal right to purchase this water.

■ **Helping keep your sewer costs down:** In a shining example of multi-stakeholder cooperation, we participated with local water retailers, Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts and others to obtain regulatory approval of an innovative way to manage the impacts of chloride in water discharged into the Santa Clara River by the local wastewater treatment plants — called the Alternative Water Resources Management plan.

This "outside-the-box" solution is designed to protect salt-sensitive agriculture downstream in Ventura County, while also significantly reducing future wastewater treatment costs.

The AWRM plan avoids the need for costly construction of treatment facilities and a brine line to the ocean. In short, the AWRM plan is a much less expensive and much more environmentally beneficial approach than the original one contemplated by the Los Angeles County Regional Water Quality Control Board, which just last month approved the AWRM plan.

We are proud of reaching a solution that's in the best interests of

the customers we and the Sanitation Districts have in common.

■ **An integrated water plan:** Along with the local water retailers and other stakeholders, we completed the Integrated Regional Water Management Plan for the SCV. This process has identified a number of water-related projects that will be eligible for state grants.

The intent of the IRWMP is to promote regional cooperation and improve water supply reliability, water recycling, conservation, recreation and environmental protection.

■ **Ready to expand:** As part of our ongoing efforts to meet growing demand, we completed design of a planned expansion of the Rio Vista Water Treatment Plant. This estimated \$45 million project will double the capacity of Rio Vista from 30 million gallons to 60 million gallons per day.

■ **Finished construction of a major pipeline:** CLWA completed construction of the Sand Canyon project, the last major component of our wholesale pipeline system. The project is now on line, and it consists of a new pipeline, pump station and reservoir serving the eastern portion of the valley.

■ **Responding to issues in the Delta:** Two court rulings were handed down that are expected to have long-term effects on California water availability. Both rulings addressed pumping of water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Del-

ta, resulting in a court order that reduces the amount of water that can be pumped to protect a threatened fish, the Delta smelt.

This affects all agencies, such as CLWA, that receive water from the State Water Project. As a result, we coordinated with the city of Santa Clarita and Los Angeles County regarding its impact on the local water supply.

We modified our SWP supply projections and, thanks to our diverse water supply portfolio and storage programs, we determined we were still able to meet the needs not only of our existing customers but also to continue meeting the valley's future needs.

■ **Conservation outreach:** Considering the ongoing drought as well as the Delta-related challenges, we launched a public outreach program advocating conservation. Rather than simply promoting conservation during dry years, we and the local water retailers are advocating a new, permanent water use ethic.

Even when this drought ends, we believe it's important to continuously strive for efficient use of this increasingly valuable resource.

When something is reliable — you use it every day and it's always there when you need it — it's only natural that you might take it for granted. However, I believe the successful efforts of your local water professionals in meeting a diverse array of challenges in 2008 illustrates the fact that a clean, reliable supply of water doesn't just "happen."

It's only there for you every day as a result of vigilance, smart planning and passionate determination on the part of the people who make it their mission to bring you this vital resource.

And, as proud as we are of these successes in the past year, our efforts do not come to an end.

Securing and delivering your water supply is a job that is ongoing, continuously, from one year to the next.

In our second installment of this two-part commentary, we'll take a look ahead at the rest of this year, and outline our goals, objectives and plans to continue meeting these and other challenges head-on in 2009.

—R.J. Kelly is president of the Castaic Lake Water Agency Board of Directors. His column reflects the agency's views and not necessarily those of The Signal.