

Solutions in the Santa Clara Valley

Craig Breon
Environmental Advocate
Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society

Santa Clara County provides an instructive microcosm for BDAC and CALFED in their search for solutions in the Delta that do not overly disrupt the water needs of agricultural and urban water users. In the areas of water resource planning, conservation, recycling, and point and nonpoint source pollution control, Santa Clara County has taken steps which other regions of the state must eventually take as well. A look at our region's successes and shortfalls is worthwhile.

Water Use

One of the principal facts to note is that overall water use in Santa Clara County has hardly risen in the last ten years. Water use peaked in the mid- to late-80's at 400 thousand acre feet and has only last year again reached that level. This fact is all the more impressive when taken in the context of the boom of Silicon Valley over that same time period. Growth has located huge new numbers of both people and companies in this area, but those people and companies have not required large new supplies of water.

This is only partly attributable to the drought of the early 90's. Of greater importance has been the impressive returns from vigorous conservation and the increasing contribution from recycling. Some areas of Southern California have achieved similar results. Most every urban region of the state could perform similarly.

Water Resource Planning

From March through November of 1996 the Santa Clara Valley Water District (District) convened a group of 21 stakeholders to develop an Integrated Water Resource Plan (IWRP). The IWRP was designed to plan for an estimated 100,000 additional acre feet the region might need in order to weather a severe drought while accommodating regional growth through the year 2020. In wet to normal years, current supplies will likely accommodate planned growth.

In my five years as the Environmental Advocate for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, I have participated in a number of "stakeholder" processes, but have only once before experienced a process as successful as the IWRP. The timeline was short; the group achieved what was asked of it; stakeholders dominated both the discussion and the decisionmaking, as opposed to District board members or staff; and the end result was near unanimous (only one stakeholder had serious reservations).

The IWRP stakeholders chose to fill our future water needs through a flexible program of water banking, recycled water, demand management, and long-term transfers. This package produced a high degree of flexibility, minimal environmental impacts, and fairly low cost. Conspicuously absent from the menu was additional reservoir storage, which was considered by the group and had been favored by some District board members in the past. New storage was rejected by nearly all stakeholders (of whom only two represented the environmental community) because of cost, environmental concerns, inherent inflexibility, and the length and uncertainty of the permitting process.

The District Board unanimously approved the IWRP recommendations of the stakeholders group. The IWRP Final Report can be obtained from the District; its 14 page executive summary is a good read.

Recycling

Our region must recycle. Due to problems with wastewater flows to the South Bay, increased water supply has been seen as a secondary benefit to recycling, with reduced wastewater flows being the driving force. However, these priorities will likely balance over time, as recycled water becomes more generally available and accepted. Currently, the San Jose/Santa Clara Water Pollution Control Plant has the capacity to recycle more than 20 million gallons a day. There is additional recycling capacity in the southern portion of Santa Clara County, used primarily for agricultural irrigation.

Our region, as well as others in Southern California, are slowly solving the technical, financial, and other barriers to large-scale recycling. Most likely, those areas with wastewater concerns--such as the Southern California coast and portions of the Central Valley, as well as our County--should and will be the focus of recycling efforts.

Pollution Prevention and Control

Santa Clara County was issued one of the first regional nonpoint source NPDES permits in the nation. While it has been only partially successful, the process of permit issuance, renewal, and implementation has focused the municipalities of our region on this issue. As a result, water quality in the South Bay has improved.

It should be axiomatic that all regions of the Bay, Delta, and upstream watersheds should be required to wrestle with the same issues Santa Clara County has and should have a deadline for issuance of nonpoint source NPDES permits. The mechanism for requiring this is in place (the Clean Water Act) and should be used by CALFED to accomplish much of its water quality goals.