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The strange and murky world of water policy

By Jake Mackenzie

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Norris Hundley, Jr., in his *The Great Thirst, A Discussion of California's Water History*, says "How crucial government has been - local, regional, state or national - in shaping water policy and use. In the 20th century, the impulse of Californians has been to tap the National Treasury when it comes to developing water resources." The encouragement of the electorate has supported these ventures. However, in past decades "costs, environmental damage, and heavy public expense have contributed to requests for reform."

Here in Sonoma County water policy has been driven by the Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) which supplies water as far north as Windsor and as far south as Novato and Central Marin County. The governing body of SCWA is the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. These five supervisors/directors have had the greatest influence over local water policy decisions for the past fifty years.

State influence is exerted on local water policy through the State Water Boards whose five members are appointed by the Governor.

Geography is also a critical determinate in shaping water policy in our area. We live in the Russian River Watershed. We are physically separate from the great Central Valley. Our water is not imported from other parts of the state, with the exception of water diverted from the Eel River in Humboldt County, via the Potter Valley Project. This water is added to the water collected in Lake Mendocino (Mendocino County) and Lake Sonoma (Sonoma County), behind dams operated by the US Army Corps of Engineers (COE).

Water flows in the Russian River are governed by Decision 1610 of the State Water Boards. Water supply south of Healdsburg is governed by SCWA's water rights and by the Restructured Agreement between SCWA and its eight contractors. This notorious agreement, now in its 13th version, establishes the manner in which our water supply operates. Specific contractors then sell Russian River water to their customers. For example, Petaluma is a contractor, and sells its Russian River water allocation to its residents and businesses. Contractors may also sell ground water (from underground wells), or surface water (from reservoirs.)

Environmental regulatory impacts on water supply policy are now considerable. For example, The Endangered Species Act has designated Russian River salmon as either threatened or endangered. To protect these fish, a legally enforceable Biological Opinion was agreed to by SCWA, COE and the National Marine Fisheries Service in 2008. Implementation of this document will impact water flows in the Russian River in 2009.

On March 2 the Water Advisory Committee to SCWA will meet to consider matters dealing with Russian River water allocation and the future cost of water to the contractors and their commercial and residential customers. This is the venue where all interested parties will be swimming in the murky waters of water policy. As Hundley says, "The record describes the activities of a wide and often confused and cross-cutting range of interest groups and bureaucrats, both public and private, who accomplish what they do as a result of shifting alliances despite frequent disputes among themselves."

*Jake Mackenzie is chair on the Water Advisory Committee (WAC) to Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA).*

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