

Reservoir use sparks objection to Oxnard's recycled water delivery

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CAMARILLO, Calif. - A potential snag has arisen with plans to get Oxnard's recycled water to farmers this fall.

The conflict involves storage in two reservoirs owned by a water district that hasn't consented to use of its facilities.

The district says it supports Oxnard's project. But because the recycled supply is more strictly regulated than other sources, the agency worries that as landowner it could be exposed to potentially costly liabilities. Regulators have not authorized recycled water storage in the reservoirs, the district says.

The State Water Resources Control Board has been asked to review the situation and delay any deliveries until the issue can be ironed out.

Separately, an environmental group has requested the state board overturn a regional board's approval last month of the overall project, saying the recycled supply should be offset by increased flows in the Santa Clara River.

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The filings stem from a deal OK'd by regional regulators July 9. That approval by the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board allows Oxnard to temporarily use a pipeline owned by Calleguas Municipal Water District to carry recycled water to growers east of the city in the Pleasant Valley County Water District.

Oxnard plans to build a pipeline, but the temporary arrangement would speed delivery to drought-parched agricultural users.

The reservoirs sit next to Pleasant Valley's Camarillo offices on Las Posas Road. Pleasant Valley manages the reservoirs, but they are owned by the United Water Conservation District.

Historically, only groundwater and surface water has been stored there. While Pleasant Valley gets water from Thousand Oaks' Hill Canyon Wastewater Treatment Plant, that supply arrives as surface water, from a regulatory standpoint, after traveling through the Conejo Creek.

Deliveries to Pleasant Valley's irrigation system necessitate storage in the reservoirs.

United has asked the state board to postpone any deliveries until it has an agreement in place with Pleasant Valley clarifying responsibilities. Alternatively, United has asked the state board to authorize recycled water storage and clarify monitoring and legal obligations.

"United will ultimately be held responsible as the landowner should anything go awry," its petition to the state board reads.

For example, if recycled water escapes from the reservoir, it could enter Camarillo's stormwater system, which would "arguably be illegal" under federal, state and local rules, the filing says.

Anthony Trembley, United's lawyer, said introduction of any recycled water to the reservoirs "changes the character of the operation."

The lawyer for Pleasant Valley, John Mathews, said his district is encouraged United supports the project.

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"We, too, are hopeful we can reach an agreement on the use of the reservoir," he said.

Timothy Moran, spokesman for the state water board, said the agency typically makes decisions on petitions within 90 days.

When a stay is requested, as with United's filing, a decision on that component is made within 60 days.

Oxnard, which recently started up its Advanced Water Purification Facility on Perkins Road, hopes to deliver recycled water to the Pleasant Valley farmers by October.

Pleasant Valley is an agricultural irrigation district serving growers on the Oxnard Plain south of Camarillo. United manages groundwater and surface water channeled from Lake Piru, the man-made reservoir it owns, along the Santa Clara River to facilities downstream. It serves cities, farmers and industrial users.

A separate petition submitted to the state board by the Wishtoyo Foundation challenges the overall agreement approved by the regional board last month.

It argues Oxnard's recycled supply should be "used reasonably" to offset Santa Clara River water diverted by United.

"When new water is brought into a water-scarce region," said Wishtoyo's general counsel, Jason Weiner, in a statement, "it should not be utilized to perpetuate decades of unsustainable, unreasonable and wasteful water practices that have led to the mining of Ventura County's groundwater aquifers and the draining of the public's streams."

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