

Submitted by George Riley
at 4/3/08 EAC meeting.

The Herald

Performing under water pressure

By GEORGE RILEY
Guest commentary

Article Last Updated: 03/25/2008 01:53:16 AM PDT

The Peninsula water supply is regulated by many agencies. One is the very powerful State Water Resources Control Board, which issued the famous Order 95-10 in 1995 that demanded reduced drafting of water from the Carmel River.

The state board recently issued another order, a draft cease-and-desist order that, in effect, is shouting out. "We warned you! Your actions are insufficient! We are intervening!"

Of course, there are downsides to such an order. It might give an agency an open checkbook for a water project. It could lead to penalties and fines. All of these expenses will fall on the ratepayer. Most agencies will oppose the order. They will try to explain away delays, ask for more time and cite current efforts. They will say "Trust us!"

I see it differently. I think the cease-and-desist order creates advantages by creating pressure:

- It concentrates the mind.
- It sets priorities. A new water supply is the issue, and it must deal immediately with the Carmel River overdraft.
- It will test local leadership's ability to come together. Past efforts have been fragmented. As California American Water pursued one option, the Water Management District pursued another. The

cities of Sand City and Monterey adopted individual plans for desal plants.

· It will test the resolve of local leaders to make the distinction between the demands of 95-10, and assumptions about growth. The draft order blames subtle growth and lack of attention for the delay. The draft order demands immediate compliance with 95-10. How much more clarity is needed?

· It should speed up crackdown on water wasters. Last December, Cal Am reported that 20 percent of residential customers used 46 percent of residential water.

· It will test the ability of the community to change its perception of water. We live in denial. Our regulations allow lawns and water-demanding landscapes. Our governments allow developments with paper water allotments and unproven supplies. We rely on devices to reduce water use and offer rebates as if money is the only incentive. Yet we hinder use of rainwater catchments and gray-water use. What happened to logic, awareness and values that reflect the carrying capacity of our area? There needs to be a concerted effort to change our perceptions.

Of the supply proposals in the works, which one is most appropriate, financially balanced, quickest and least contentious?

Three desal plants are in the race — Cal Am's, the REPOG regional plan sited in Marina, and the smaller Water Management District proposal for a Sand City location. In my opinion, only the latter two are worthy and competitive.

Desal plants are very expensive and the energy costs are accelerating. They are now estimated at 30-50 percent of operating costs. Another issue not addressed is what we can afford as a community and as individual ratepayers. As everything gets more expensive, should water be a market-priced commodity? How much do we expect to spend for a necessity?

But perhaps the pressure to perform will get the best results when we alter our way of thinking in a water-scarce environment. The leadership and the community must be pressured to see clearly that we cannot spend our way into water bliss.

George Riley is a Monterey activist and co-founder of Citizens for Public Water.

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