

## Guest commentary: Water District clarifies its “Water for Housing” initiative

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The Monterey Herald ran an article April 9 about the Water Management District’s initiative to obtain relief from certain aspects of the State Water Board’s Cease and Desist Order to facilitate more housing starts on the Peninsula. It appears there is some confusion about what the District’s proposal actually asks for, especially as indicated by the Sierra Club’s complete misunderstanding which was cited in the article.

Yes – it is a nuanced issue. The problem with the Herald article and Sierra Club letter, among others, is that it has been characterized as an “increase in supply” which many have interpreted as more water from the Carmel River outside of the legal limits. Instead, our request is that the overall legal limit remains intact, but the Condition 2 prohibition on an increase in use at a particular site be waived for housing needs. Any increase in use would come from the built-up savings due to conservation activities over time. In other words, assuming legally authorized supplies exceed current demand, the community has built up a buffer of savings, a small amount of which would be annually allocated or repurposed for housing uses. There is no intent to get authorization for an increased withdrawal from the River beyond the legal limit.

Two important things must be kept in mind: First, no new housing projects affected by the proposal would be complete by the end of this calendar year (and in fact, will take many years before a new tap can be turned on). Second, after Dec. 31, 2021, the legal limit for California American Water withdrawals drops to its approved water right – nothing more. The proposal does not ask for “extra” water, rather the intent is to remove uncertainty over an interpretation within the Order that makes developers, cities, and housing advocates queasy about how enforcement might be interpreted.

Further, the water would not be utilized overnight – such development will take several years to design, permit, and build. Hence, current dry-year concerns are overblown. Yet, we are concerned. This idea all penciled out last year when we started the initiative, but the ensuing dry year and California American Water’s failure to move expeditiously toward a new permanent supply has created a condition where that “buffer” between legally available supplies and actual demand has been narrowed. It may be difficult to sustain this Water for Housing initiative for the three to four years needed awaiting a permanent supply to come online if dry conditions persist. Checking the math is something we would endeavor to do in conjunction with the State Water Board before asking them to commit.

*David J. Stoldt is the general manager of the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District.*