



FILE PHOTO

A sign for the Sites Town Square founded by John Sites in 1887 stands in the valley, which could become Sites Reservoir.

Finding the right water fixes for Orange County

By Paul A. Cook

A recent column in these pages accurately described how climate fluctuations every few years can affect water supply in Southern California. And yes, supply variations must be addressed by water resource agencies. A solution being considered by the Orange County Water District, buying desalinated seawater from Poseidon Resources, would create a continuous supply of new water — even in the years when we don't need it. Because we know that the problem is the variability of our water supply, why commit to a \$1 billion alternative that does not address the problem of water supply variability?

A better solution is to store water when it is plentiful so it is available when needed.

Northern Orange County is blessed with a large and well-maintained aquifer. Like a savings account, an aquifer is a great place to save up for a day when you might run a bit short — whether it be cash or water. In the driest years of the drought, Orange County Water District, charged with managing our aquifer, did not require any of the retail water agencies to cut back on groundwater. Then, after the very wet winter of 2017, water managers across northern Orange County voluntarily reduced pumping from the aquifer, helping groundwater levels rebound substantially.

So what would a 56,000-acre-foot-per-year seawater desalination plant do for Orange County? First, in the name of “independence,” Orange County would be turning its back on 56,000 acre-feet of wa-

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ter already being provided — quite reliably and at a fraction of the cost — by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. (If OCWD receives a cost subsidy from Metropolitan for Poseidon water, OCWD will be required to take less water from Metropolitan.) Orange County is already fully invested in Metropolitan's infrastructure, which includes the pipelines and reservoirs that provided a reliable water supply for Southern California throughout the drought. For Denis Bildeau to characterize Orange County's participation in such a robust and reliable water system as “beholden” misrepresents the substantial benefits we receive as influential members of Metropolitan. Wouldn't we simply end up exchanging reliance on Metropolitan for decades of dependence on a private company, Poseidon Resources, at more than double the cost of water?

Second, the proposed seawater desalination plant does not address the potential need for water in shortage years. Water managers agree that in most years, Orange County has access to ample supplies of water from the aquifer and from Metro-

politan. Therefore, it follows that improvements to the Orange County water supply should directly address a potential shortage that may occur infrequently. For example, Irvine Ranch Water District, working with partners including Metropolitan and Municipal Water District of Orange County, has developed a “water bank” in Kern County where water is stored specifically for use in shortage years at a cost comparable to water from Metropolitan. This program could be expanded to benefit other water agencies in Orange County. In fact, Orange County Water District could develop a similar program right here in Orange County to bank water for use in shortage conditions, directly addressing the issue of water supply variability and avoiding the need to construct a desalination plant on Huntington Beach.

Many of my 25 years in the water industry have been spent working with Orange County Water District. Orange County has benefited from OCWD's foresight associated with the development of the Groundwater Replenishment System and the tenacity with which groundwater supplies are protected from contamination. OCWD is wise to include economic feasibility in its analysis, as long as the feasibility aligns with the need. Unfortunately, this seawater desalination “grand solution” will require ratepayers to pay for very expensive water whether it is needed or not. Seawater desalination is not a solution that fits our problem; groundwater storage is the correct solution.

Paul A. Cook has been general manager of Irvine Ranch Water District since 2011.