

History of Water in San Benito County

So far this year we have had a wet winter and the Sierra's have snow. That's great news!

People are starting to wonder, are we out of drought? But water is a long term proposition. We can't judge our water supply on one year of good rain and snowfall.

We need to move towards a sustainable water future where our water needs can be met while protecting and satisfying the needs of the environment and future generations.

Examining our county's water history one can see that at every juncture of growth, efforts were made to achieve a balanced and sustainable groundwater basin. Today is no different as we move forward in time.

Below is a brief outline of our county's water history:

The Hollister Irrigation District was formed in 1922 after purchasing the privately constructed and owned Brown Company System. This consisted of the Paicines Reservoir, the Paicines Diversion dam and canal, canals and ditches in the Hollister area, and also included the Perkins Diversion Dam on Southside Road.

In 1953, the State passed legislation establishing the District Act, forming the agency that would eventually become the San Benito County Water District (SBCWD).

In 1957, the financing for building and operating Hernandez Dam, and the reconstruction of the Paicines Canal and Diversion works were approved. Due to an increase in population and agricultural activity in the Hollister-San Juan area, Hernandez Dam was needed to protect our local groundwater basin from being in overdraft. The dam is situated to capture water from the watershed surrounding San Benito Mountain, the highest point in our county at 5,267 feet. This water helps recharge our groundwater basin as the San Benito River travels from South County towards the Pajaro River on the northwest side of our county.

Twenty year later, after much work by local officials, civic leaders and residents, voters in San Benito County voted with 82% approval to fund the project to implement and import water. More water was needed for our growing county and voters wanted better water quality.

In 1978, the SBCWD entered into a contract with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) to finance the project and act as the delivering agency for the contracted 43,800 acre feet of imported water for agriculture and 8,250 acre-feet for urban customers from the Central Valley Project. Contracts were awarded in 1982 to start construction on San Benito's own distribution system to deliver the imported water from San Luis Reservoir. Thus forming the San Felipe Division of the Central Valley Project.

The local distribution system is comprised of eight pressure reducing turnouts, four pumping facilities, eleven percolation sites, and the 10,000 acre foot San Justo Reservoir. A computerized telemetry system aids in

delivering water through over 120 miles of buried pipe. The USBR assets that the SBCWD shares with the Santa Clara Valley Water District are: The Pacheco Tunnel, Pacheco Pumping Plant and Pacheco Conduit. The District's share of the capital investment was over \$120,000,000 in 1987 dollars.

Today, the District manages the groundwater in the San Benito County portion of the Hollister-Gilroy basin, operates the San Benito River System and the San Felipe Distribution System, delivers imported CVP water to irrigation and municipal and industrial (M&I) customers, and manages recharge through local streams. The District is governed by an elected five member Board of Directors, and administered by the District Manager/Engineer.

Everyone in the Hollister-San Juan groundwater basin benefit from the imported water because the purchased water helps balance the overall water needs in the basin, is superior in quality to groundwater pumped from local aquifers and is more conducive to crop growth. Local groundwater has varying levels of salts and high mineral content.

However, our underground aquifers are of utmost importance. Although our groundwater contains a high mineral content, our groundwater basin acts as an underground reservoir. Its' storage capacity is approximately 500,000 acre-feet of water. For comparisons sake, San Luis Reservoir has a 2,000,000 acre foot capacity. Our three above-ground reservoirs in our county (Hernandez, San Justo and Paicines) hold approximately 31,000 acre-feet combined.

Due to the drought, we have had very little rainfall or imported water for the last several years. Our groundwater basin has been the main source of our water supply (83%). This year's Groundwater Report (December 2016), shows lowering of water levels throughout most of the basin. Hopefully, this year will be the beginning of a slow recovery from long term drought. The basin was last full in 2011 and that's what got us through this recent drought. We need to refill the basin once again with natural rainfall and imported water so that we can have a safeguard against future droughts that are sure to come again.

That's why the Hollister Urban Area Water Project (HUAWP) is so important to our future. This is a joint effort by the City of Hollister, the San Benito County Water District and the Sunnyslope County Water District that will be completed by next summer. The main goal is to improve drinking water quality for residents and businesses in the entire Hollister Urban Area. This will also help meet wastewater discharge requirements and protect the groundwater basin by having better quality wastewater. The project also produces a high quality recycled water for agricultural customers. This adds to our local water supply.

This plan represents the ongoing efforts to protect and maintain a reliable water supply. Each generation has had their way of improving and maintaining our water system. As we move into the future sustainability is key.