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CALIFORNIA WATER AGENCY MAY BE THE FIRST IN THE NATION TO BE LED BY A FISH BIOLOGIST WHOSE PREVIOUS JOB WAS PROTECTING ENDANGERED SPECIES

San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District hired Heather Dyer away from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2014 to guide water agency efforts to coordinate development of a habitat conservation plan for the Santa Ana River.

Dyer has since been promoted to CEO/General Manager, providing the agency with unique insights on ways to balance the water needs of people with the need to protect our environment

SAN BERNARDINO, California, March 3, 2021 — Nobody understands the dangers facing the Santa Ana sucker and other threatened or endangered species in the Santa Ana River more than Heather Dyer.

For four years years, beginning in 2010 when she moved to California, Dyer was the fish biologist spearheading U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service efforts to protect the Santa Ana sucker, the tiny fish whose habitat was threatened by water projects along the Santa Ana River.



Water agencies in San Bernardino and Riverside counties had just won state approval to capture as much as 198,000 acre-feet of stormwater flows per year from the river, when the Fish and Wildlife Service doubled the designated critical habitat area for the sucker. But the federal agency's doubling of critical habitat for the sucker immediately prevented water agencies from building any new water projects along the Santa Ana River.

Water agencies spent the next three years fighting a fruitless legal battle against the Fish and Wildlife Service. However, Dyer understood that the actual key to obtaining necessary federal and state permits for water projects lay in partnership and collaboration between the Service and the water agencies to create more habitat and more fish, with less water.

In 2014 water agencies finally realized that the only way they could build local stormwater and recycled water projects in the Santa Ana River would be to strategically make use of water supplies and land resources to promote recovery of endangered species in the Santa Ana River.

By that time, Dyer had not only won the respect of water agency officials for her expertise in protecting threatened and endangered species, but she had established herself as a friendly and easily approachable Fish and Wildlife Service representative that water agency staff members could work with as they made the transition from courtroom adversaries to collaborative partners. She had proven herself to be a problem solver who cared passionately about helping the water agencies meet their missions while also protecting the River's ecosystem.

Doug Headrick, the former general manager of San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District, was so impressed with Dyer he hired her away from the federal government and put her in charge of leading 16 state, federal and local agencies in the development of the Upper Santa Ana River Habitat Conservation Plan.

Developed over the past six years, the plan describes specific habitat restoration and conservation projects that will be built in the coming decades to mitigate the effects of nearly 100 water capture, groundwater recharge, water reuse, and pipeline projects that are needed to enhance local water security over the next 50 years.



The plan is expected to be approved by state and federal agencies this year, providing Inland Empire residents with increased water security as well as protection for over 20 threatened and endangered species.

Dyer, meanwhile, has been promoted to the position of Valley District's CEO and general manager, replacing Headrick, who retired in late 2019.

Dyer's promotion is unique not only because relatively few women hold top management positions in water agencies, which are typically run by male engineers, but because having a water agency run by a former Fish and Wildlife Service biologist is practically unheard of in the U.S. water industry.

"I don't know of any other general manager of a water agency in the United States who previously worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," Dyer said.

But Dyer's unique experience protecting endangered species and developing new and what she calls "climate resilient" water supplies during a period of global climate uncertainty enables her to have perspectives few water agency leaders have.

In retrospect, she said, local water agencies' plans were initially too big for the reality of the Santa Ana River system.. "The way projects were proposed 10 years ago, everybody was focused on water within their own control and how each agency could maximize the value of that water on their own. What water agencies had originally proposed would have dried up the Santa Ana River and simply not be permissible," Dyer said.

"What we have found since then is that, in reality, all of our agencies, including the federal and state wildlife agencies, are highly interconnected and dependent upon sustaining the health and function of our watershed so

that the system will continue to provide water supply, habitat, recreation, and other benefits.”

Dyers’ leadership of Valley District and her unique background working for both the Fish and Wildlife Service and now a major Southern California water agency has been welcomed by water agencies and environmental organizations alike.

“Mrs. Dyer has been able to bridge the gap that often causes long delays and misunderstanding between water suppliers and environmental protection agencies,” said Miguél J. Guerrero, general manager of the San Bernardino Municipal Water Department.

“Valley District sort of took the ‘if you can’t beat them, join them approach’ by bringing Mrs. Dyer onboard, but with a twist. Her background and leadership have been instrumental in getting all parties to come together to develop an HCP that benefits all: the environment is made whole or improved and water resource projects are able to move forward to improve water supply sustainability in the Santa Ana River Watershed.”

“Heather ‘speaks the language’ of the wildlife agencies and understands permit requirements,” said Dan Silver, executive director of the Endangered Habitats League in Los Angeles. “Her biological background makes a big difference from our perspective. She is much better able to integrate species needs with the district’s water needs. She is a good communicator and this is key to positive relationships with the agencies.”

Silver added that water districts and flood control agencies have not been seen as “allies of conservation” in the past. This has changed with Dyers’ involvement in the development of the Habitat Conservation Plan for the Santa Ana River. “The Upper Santa Ana River HCP has invited stakeholders into the process and engaged them proactively. This is a big step forward,” he said.

“Heather’s ‘can-do’ attitude and her outside-the-box thinking is refreshing,” said Ileene Anderson, a senior scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “With her degree in biology, Heather is well grounded in science and recognizes the complexities of water management in arid Southern California.”

While water agencies plan to make use of their new water rights to Santa Ana River water, Dyer said they plan to capture and store the water over a greater amount of time and dedicate a minimum flow to the Santa Ana River for protection of the ecosystem.

“We have to find the right balance,” Dyer said. “Just as water agencies can’t take all of the water out of the river to the detriment of fish and wildlife, the region needs a long-term reliable local water supply as well. The challenge moving forward with all of our water resource planning is to make sure that we are developing a climate resilient water portfolio that includes multiple diverse sources of water so that we can adapt to unknown future conditions. We also need to build this reliable system while minimizing our impact on the environment,” she said.

With these guiding principles in mind, Valley District is developing a diversified, climate-resilient water portfolio that not only makes increased use of local stormwater runoff, but increases use of recycled water.



Local stormwater and recycled water supplies complement Valley District’s imports of State Water Project water from the Sierra Nevada, which is becoming less reliable as a result of climate change.

“The State Water Project will always be an important water supply source for Inland Empire water agencies. But with droughts, reduced snowpack, and other factors related to climate change, we have to plan for unknown changes to state water deliveries. It is imperative that we diversify our water supply portfolio to include reliable local supply,” Dyer said, adding, “Climate change is forcing us to realize there may come a day when we cannot count on the Sierra snowpack. I see the California water system as an interconnected ecosystem. The weather in Northern California affects us just as much as the weather in Southern California. As with any ecosystem in the time of climate change, adaptation is the key to resilience.”

About San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District

Valley District is a State Water contractor that provides supplemental water to 14 retail water agencies from Fontana to Yucaipa, meeting the water needs of 700,000 business and residential customers. In addition to providing supplemental water from Northern California, Valley District is responsible for long-range water planning throughout its 325 square mile service area, including importing supplemental water, groundwater management, and wastewater and storm water disposal. For more information about Valley District and water use efficiency, visit www.sbvmwd.com