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## **VALLEY DISTRICT SEEKING FEDERAL FUNDING TO STUDY THE FEASIBILITY OF USING SEVEN OAKS DAM FOR ENHANCED WATER SUPPLY**

***Valley District always believed the dam should be used for both flood control and water supply purposes. But the required studies to authorize dual use of the dam have never been completed.***

San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District supported construction of Seven Oaks Dam because the district believed it would not only provide flood control, but capture precious drinking water for the benefit of Inland Empire water agencies.

But the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which completed construction of the dam in 2000, has never been officially authorized to use the 550-foot-tall structure for anything other than flood control purposes. This project, which cost the tax payers \$450 million in the late 1990s, has the capacity to hold at least 115,000 acre-feet in its reservoir, yet it is only authorized to provide “incidental water conservation.”

“Everyone knows that it is a colossal challenge to construct a new above-ground reservoir these days in California, yet in the Santa Ana watershed we have an existing dam and reservoir that has already been built, to the tune of nearly \$700 million in today’s dollars, that is only operated for a single purpose,” said

Paul Kielhold, president of San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District Board of Directors.

“Despite the Seven Oaks Dam being perfectly situated and technically able to provide massive water supply benefits to the people of the region, water conservation is not currently part of the project,” Kielhold said.

And as California experiences yet another year of drought, the third driest in history, Valley District is once again pushing for completion of the required feasibility analysis and environmental permitting so that Seven Oaks Dam can be fully utilized for both flood control and water supply purposes.

The San Bernardino-based Valley District recently submitted a Community Project Funding request for \$2.5 million in federal funds, which would cover half of the anticipated costs of the proposed Seven Oaks Dam Water Conservation Feasibility Study. The study would examine the feasibility of operating the dam in a manner that enhances the downstream water agencies’ ability to capture and recharge the water being released through the dam after storm events.

“By strategically releasing the water, operations of the dam could augment our local groundwater supply while also protecting water quality, and protecting or even enhancing downstream habitat for several key species,” said Heather Dyer, Valley District's general manager and CEO. Valley District staff members are proactively engaging with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to identify ways both agencies can work collaboratively to help each other fulfill their respective missions.

“We believe there is momentum to find a win-win solution that could conclude decades of unfinished business so that the dam can be fully utilized for both flood control and water conservation purposes. This is critical as we continue to experience extended droughts and reductions in our imported water supplies from Northern California,” Dyer said.

Valley District itself was instrumental in convincing the Corps of Engineers to build Seven Oaks Dam in its current location.

When the federal agency first announced plans to build a dam in the Mentone area in the 1970s, its intent was to protect Orange County from the ravages of 100-year floods along the Santa Ana River.

Orange County suffered widespread damage during the historic 1938 flood and while the Prado Dam, built in 1941, provided some flood control protection, the Corps believed that another dam was needed upstream at the base of the San Bernardino Mountains. Valley District supported the idea of building a dam, not only for flood control purposes, but to capture precious stormwater runoff from the San Bernardino Mountains for use by local agencies.

But Valley District opposed the Corps' plans to build the proposed 250-foot tall, 3.5-mile-long dam in Mentone because it would cover critical water percolation basins that the District and other agencies use to recharge local groundwater basin. Valley District argued that using the detention basins for flood control purposes would create excessive silting, eventually clogging up the percolation basins and reducing their effectiveness.

Valley District worked hard to persuade the Corps to relocate the proposed dam to another location deeper into the mountains so that it could be used for both flood control and water supply benefits. The Seven Oaks Dam was eventually built on one of 14 sites originally recommended as a potential dam site in a 1928 State of California Engineers Report.

But while the Seven Oaks Dam was completed in 2000, the dam is still not officially authorized to serve any purpose beyond flood control. A 1997 feasibility study concluded that seasonal storage of water could take place at Seven Oaks Dam without seriously affecting the project's flood control capability. But a "Record of Decision," which is part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, was never signed because the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) did not address potential impacts from the project on the newly listed endangered San Bernardino kangaroo rat.

After the Santa Ana sucker was subsequently listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act in 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a biological opinion in 2002 concluding the operations and maintenance of the dam would not jeopardize the continued existence of either the San Bernardino kangaroo rat or the Santa Ana sucker. But the biological opinion did not include water conservation as part of the proposed action or project description, so the dam cannot legally be operated for water conservation purposes at this time.

As the current drought continues and as our weather patterns become more erratic due to the changing climate, it is becoming increasingly imperative that Seven Oaks Dam be used for both flood control and water conservation purposes.

“I believe that it is a fundamental duty to the taxpayers that we both serve that Valley District and the Corps find a way to work together to solve this long-standing problem,” Dyer said. “It won’t be easy, but since the mid-2000s when this problem was last tackled, we have put key pieces in place in terms of environmental issues related to Seven Oaks Dam water conservation, which we have addressed through the Upper Santa Ana River Habitat Conservation Plan. We now need some help from our partners at the Corps to finish the required federal studies and bring it all together so that the dam can finally be authorized and operated for flood control and water supply benefits, as it was originally envisioned.”

Valley District hopes to find out by April 28, 2021, if its’ request for federal funding assistance for Seven Oaks Dam Water Conservation Feasibility Study has been approved. If successful, they hope to begin collaboration with the Corps to expedite the study within the next several months.

#### **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.sbvmd.com](http://www.sbvmd.com).

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