

Cruise: Searles Valley Minerals committed to IWV water security

By Andrew L. Bergman For The Daily Independent
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Searles Valley Minerals President Dennis Cruise addresses the Rotary Club of China Lake in October 2024.

						
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“We need to first agree on a set of facts,” said Dennis Cruise, President of Searles Valley Mineral Inc, speaking about discrepancies between company and government findings about our local water supply.

Cruise spoke with the Rotary Club of China Lake about his company's recent water-related conflict with the state of California, as well as sharing how they have benefited the community for over a century.

SVM has been pumping water from the IWW Groundwater Basin for over 90 years, the oldest water rights in the region. In addition to pumping water to run its plants, it directly supplies water to Trona, since 1943, and owns five potable wells in the basin.

The company has come into conflict with the state's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. Established in 2014, SGMA wants to achieve sustainable water management in California by 2040. This led to the creation of the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority, which crafted its Groundwater Sustainability Plan, completed in January 2020.

As part of the plan, the IWVGA has imposed a groundwater extraction fee of \$2,130 per acre-foot to fund bringing imported water into the IWW. This would mean about \$6 million annually in additional water costs to SVM.

According to Cruise, this fee disregards the company's 90 year-old water rights and is an immediate 7,000% increase in water costs. Conversely, the state's Cap-and-Trade program has been designed to gradually reduce carbon emissions rather than penalizing companies immediately.

SVM has commissioned a new study into the water situation; the safe yield discrepancy report. Six experts worked together to establish a safe yield — the amount of water that can be withdrawn and naturally replenished — of 14,300 acre-feet per year, nearly double the 7,650 acre-feet reported by the state. SVM report is available on its website, whereas the government report is not available for the public.

As such, SVM has created the Protect Our Valley's Water coalition to organize community members, experts, and advocates to protect the region's water.

"It may be time to revisit it — have conversations, share data — and work together toward a common solution," Cruise said.

The company started as John Searles' San Bernardino Borax Mining Company in 1873, now celebrating over 150 years of business. Currently the company operates three facilities in Trona — the Argus, Trona, and Westend plants — and produces nearly 2 million tons of minerals a year, making \$350 million annually. These materials include soda ash, sodium sulfate, boric acid, sodium borates, and salt — and the company has over 500 years of reserves.

These minerals are used in a variety of household goods such common commercial glass, soaps, and detergents. The salt is used as a water softener by the oil industry. Some of these minerals are also used in sustainable energy products like insulation and the components of windmills. SVM is currently investigating extracting lithium, a key component of batteries for electric vehicles, from the mineral yields they already produce — a local advantage over lithium deposits in other states which must be mined.

Because of how long Searles Valley Minerals has been in business, it is a generational employer. In addition, 8% of its workforce has over 35 years with the company, and 75% of its staff lives in Kern County. According to the Kern Economic Development Corporation, SVM generates \$675 million to the regional economy, and employs 575 workers directly with over 600 indirect positions.