

IWVGA outlines next steps following \$50M federal authorization

By Michael Smit For The Daily Independent
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IWVGA board member Scott Hayman discusses future plans for IWVGA at the board meeting on Jan. 8.
Screenshot by Michael Smit

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At the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority board meeting on Jan. 8, the board discussed the path forward after securing a \$50 million federal authorization through the Water Resources Development Act. This authorization, announced last month, sets a course for possible funding to assist groundwater sustainability projects in the IWV, particularly the construction of the IWVGA’s planned imported water pipeline.

“This is monumental,” said member of the public Renee Westa-Lusk.

Transitioning from funding to action

This \$50 million authorization is a major milestone, but it is just the beginning. According to Capitol Core’s Michael McKinney, who presented details on the next steps to the board, IWVGA will need congressional appropriations to access the funds and they may also seek additional federal authorizations to help fund the project.

“Congress has authorized \$50 million for the project, which is one-third of the request we made at the very beginning. That is not an unusual action for Congress,” McKinney said. He explained that IWVGA will need to request additional funding over the next few years, and he indicated that this is a standard process for projects with federal funding.

To move forward, the IWVGA expects to submit a letter of intent in February to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which will oversee the pipeline’s construction. The board emphasized the importance of meeting critical deadlines and maintaining momentum.

“This is a critical step,” said board member Phillip Peters. Speaking of Capitol Core, he said, “You guys have done a great job getting it here and across the finish line. We appreciate all your efforts on it.”

While IWVGA achieved authorization for their first major funding for the project, they expect construction to actually begin only after securing appropriations which confirm the funding—which means construction might not begin for a few years yet.

Concerns remain for domestic well owners

The WRDA funding is a key achievement for IWVGA. However, public comments highlighted that there are still challenges. Judie Decker, president of the Eastern Kern County Resource Conservation District, urged the IWVGA board to consider how their planned reserved water rights for agriculture and large businesses will leave room for the sustainability of the numerous domestic well owners across the Indian Wells Valley.

“How is this going to work when there’s only a limited amount of potable water in this valley?” Decker asked.

IWVGA legal counsel Phil Hall said, “I do understand the concern for the small well owners. Some of the problems the small well owners are experiencing is partly a cone of depression problem and partly an overdraft problem, but we are considering them and we are very

mindful of that.”

Collaboration with federal agencies

A key component of the WRDA funding is its partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps will construct the pipeline, while the IWVGA ensures compliance with local requirements and provides the required 25% non-federal match.

IWVGA outlined a timeline of key deliverables at the meeting:

- Submission of the letter of intent to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by February 2025.
- Finalizing agreements with Kern County to designate the IWVGA as the project’s implementing agency and have it assume the required non-federal cost share.
- Continuing to explore mechanisms to secure more federal funding for the project.

IWVGA water resources manager Steve Johnson said the IWVGA will hold a special meeting on Jan. 29 to discuss updates to the IWVGA groundwater sustainability plan. This meeting will provide the public with an opportunity to review the latest GSP updates and offer input. Details about the meeting will be available on the IWVGA website.