

IWVWD votes to oppose IWVGA pipeline at meeting

By Michael Smit For The Daily Independent
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At the Indian Wells Valley Water District board meeting on Sept. 9, the Water District board of directors unanimously approved a resolution to oppose the imported water pipeline project that is pivotal to the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority’s groundwater sustainability plan.

The IWVGA is a local agency responsible for ensuring sustainable water for the future of the IWV. The Water District is the public utility agency responsible for supplying water to IWV residents. The Water District is one of five voting members on the IWVGA board of directors. So far, the other four voting members have supported the imported water pipeline project.

Reasons for the Water District’s opposition to imported water rely largely on three things: cost, science, and alternatives.

Concerning cost, the Water District hired a financial advisory firm called Clean Energy Capital to perform a cost analysis study on the IWVGA’s planned imported water pipeline. They reported the cost to be around \$300 million when considering construction and water purchase, plus there will be ongoing costs for operation and maintenance.

The Water District is currently the only entity paying replenishment fees to the IWVGA, and likely will be the main payer into the foreseeable future. Therefore, the cost of imported water will trickle down to Water District customers.

Item 9 of the Water District’s resolution states that the IWVGA’s imported water pipeline project “could cause an increase in District water rates approaching 190% of what District customers currently pay.”

The Water District and the IWVGA don’t agree on science either. The issue of water sustainability revolves around the numbers of how much water is pumped out of the groundwater basin annually versus how much water naturally recharges the basin annually.

It's relatively easy to estimate how much water is pumped out of the basin by just tracking pumping numbers. However, it's not as easy to determine how much water naturally recharges it each year.

Roughly 30,000 acre-feet of water is pumped out of the IWV groundwater basin each year, much of which comes from agriculture and residential use. The IWVGA's groundwater sustainability plan states that 7,650 AFY naturally recharges the IWV groundwater basin. This number is supported by a study from the Desert Research Institute.

However, a group known as the Technical Working Group – of which the Water District is part – has been working on its own study for the last seven or so years. The numbers are in, and they now state that the IWV groundwater basin's natural recharge rate is around 14,300 AFY – roughly two times as high as the IWVGA's number.

Finally, there is the issue of alternatives. The Water District has long pushed for recycled water and wastewater treatment programs. IWVGA has looked into these programs, but determined that the payoff would be too small to make an efficient dent in the water shortfall.

However, the Water District disagrees with the IWVGA's recharge number of 7,650 AFY. It believes that if the true recharge rate is 14,300 AFY and if agriculture is reduced in the area, then perhaps recycled water could make the difference.

Board member Ron Kicinski said, "Commercial farming is going to be short-lived. And if you total up the numbers after commercial farming is gone, the 14 gets us practically to where we need to be with some minor additions perhaps through wastewater treatment."

Kicinski also asked for City of Ridgecrest officials to meet with Water District officials to work out a solution and heal the adversarial relationship they've had since the formation of IWVGA.

The Water District plans to release its study's model on its website for public inspection, and requested IWVGA to do the same with its study.

Ultimately, the Water District and IWVGA are opposing forces in an ongoing adjudication lawsuit. According to Water District legal counsel Jim Worth, an upcoming hearing in that adjudication will determine which water study will be used going forward.