

Searles Valley Minerals has open data, wants GA to talk

Andrew L. Bergman The Daily Independent
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Dennis Cruise, President of Searles Valley Minerals, addresses the IWV Republican Club.
Andrew L. Bergman/The Daily Independent

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President Dennis Cruise spoke to the Indian Wells Valley Republican Club about Searles Valley Minerals and its ongoing legal battle with the Indian Wells Valley Groundwater Authority.

“We are a logistics company as much as a mining company,” Cruise said.

Searles Valley Minerals has been in business for over 160 years, started by John W. Searles in 1863. The company has a long and storied history over the decades, leading to today where it is owned by the Nirma company from India.

In addition to the local production of minerals like borax, soda ash, and salt, SVM also has an extensive distribution network to get these products out of our remote deserts and to markets, including rail, trucks, and port facilities in Long Beach and San Diego. SVM employs 575 people directly and created another 600 indirect positions as well.

Because of its age, SVM has the longest-standing water rights in the Searles Valley, which is at the heart of its dispute with the IWVGA. For 90 years, SVM has pumped water in the area and currently own five potable wells. It also supplies and maintains the water source for residents and businesses in Trona, which is roughly 10% of the water produced by SVM.

Meanwhile, the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, SGMA, was passed in 2014 and demands that companies create a plan for sustainable water use by 2040 to reduce and reverse the “overdraft” of California’s water table. This overdraft is when more water is taken from the ground than the local environment can naturally replenish within a year, eventually emptying the water table if not regulated and sustained.

SVM and SGMA collided in the “water replenishment fee,” which could mean a 7,000% increase to the company’s water bill. A major point of contention is that previous environmentally-minded regulations were rolled out over time, allowing the company to correct its usage and reduce the fees it needed to pay. SGMA has not permitted this slower rollout, instead immediately hitting it with the \$6 million fee.

According to the GA, the local aquifer collects 7,650 acre-feet per year of water. But the Indian Wells Valley Water District and SVM’s Technical Working Group have commissioned a study that states the basin gets 14,300 acre-feet per year, nearly double that of the GA’s study. What Searles desires is active discussion about the process — what models may both parties use to come to a common conclusion, as well as what set of figures can they trust to build a plan for the future.

Without an agreed-upon measure of the local water available, SVM and the GA are essentially arguing about solutions without knowing what the actual problem is. Cruise argues that two organizations need to get on the same page of what they have to work with before they can

work together on the best plan for managing them. To this end, SVM has established the Protect Our Valley's Water coalition, organizing the community along with experts and advocates to manage the regional water together.

A concerned guest asked what would happen to SVM if it were ordered to pay the steep GA fines. Cruise explained that the fines would not put the plant at risk of shutting down, though the loss would be significantly felt, specifically mentioning that payment would slow its transition off of coal power for the Cap and Trade emission regulations.

The IWVWD is supposed to be releasing its data, hopefully the model they used, before a court on Tuesday, April 22.