

Owens River: Lesson in collaborative good

By Antonio Rossmann - Special to the Bee

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On Wednesday, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Inyo County Supervisor Susan Cash symbolically ended the most celebrated and notorious water war in American history. Ninety-three years after Los Angeles diverted the full flow of the Owens River into the city's aqueduct, Villaraigosa and Cash lifted a gate to reverse that complete diversion. Once again, water flows in the river channel. That act marked the consummation of the 1991 agreement between Los Angeles and Inyo County to govern the waters of the Owens Valley together.

Today's officials celebrate the future of Inyo and Los Angeles. The veterans, on the other hand, bear witness to the decades of work required to get there. For Inyo County and its environmental allies, that meant pressing claims for honest assessment of environmental harm and securing respect from Los Angeles. For the people of Los Angeles, that meant political leadership at the highest levels recognizing Inyo County as the legitimate agent for the Owens Valley's economy and environment, and hearing the county's request (formulated in 1985) that environmental damage be offset by rewatering the river. For the people of Inyo County, that meant daring to put aside a near-century of distrust and taking on the risk of collaboration for the Owens River's sake.

In compliance with the agreement, water will once again flow freely in its riverbed for 62 miles to storage ponds near the dry Owens Lake. From there most of the water will be pumped into the Los Angeles-bound aqueduct; a small amount will moisten the dry bed of Owens Lake to help cure dust pollution. Along the river, natural habitat will be re-established and a productive fishery will contribute to the tourist economy.

Let's hope that the long, battle-earned lessons of Inyo and Los Angeles guide other such disagreements today. Sadly, most of the other major 20th century water projects in California continue to be governed as if the Owens Valley war and peace never happened. There is one happy exception: the Central Valley Project on the San Joaquin River, where environmentalists and project sponsors have negotiated, and are now awaiting congressional approval of, the rewatering of that once-mighty river.

But on the Colorado River, four major water districts claiming the waters of Imperial County and the state itself refuse to recognize that county's right to negotiate along with them in reallocating California's share of that river. This refusal disrespects that county's role as the legitimate representative of the Imperial Valley's economic and environmental values.

In the State Water Project, California itself has essentially abdicated its authority in favor of the proprietary districts that contract for state water. In challenging the deal among the Department of Water Resources and the major contractors to surrender project assets to parochial control, Plumas County (the project's

county of origin) and environmentalists secured a judicial mandate that responsible environmental assessment precede any decision. The state's and contractors' response: Years of still-ongoing delay, coupled with a self-righteous assertion that most of the project is immune to environmental assessment.

That's precisely the response that Los Angeles unsuccessfully invoked against Inyo decades ago.

Most recently, in the proceedings to re-license one of the cornerstones of the State Water Project -- the Oroville Dam -- the Department of Water Resources and project contractors belittle the dam's host county, Butte, which is attempting to secure fair compensation for the project's impacts on the rural economy. This too is an ongoing negotiation.

We who worked to reach the settlement over the Owens River urge California's 21st century water administrators not to repeat the 20th century errors that took us so long to unknot. Inyo v. Los Angeles originated in the premise that for decades the city had been the winner, the county the loser, and that now the roles would be reversed. That dispute's conclusion recognized that collaboration makes both Inyo and Los Angeles winners: The Owens Valley's environment will be restored, and the city has found ways to serve a vastly expanded population on less water than used 30 years ago.

To water managers who insist that local government and values deserve little place in water governance, and to rural communities hardened by years of distrust, let's invoke a hopeful battle cry: Remember the Owens Valley.

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