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Mountain Counties Water Resources Association grows in stature

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The Mountain Counties Water Resources Association is exactly what the name describes. It is an association of 57 districts, agencies, cities, counties, professional consultants and regional agricultural interests that are dedicated to the management of water resources in California's mountain counties.

The Mountain Counties include the foothills and mountains of the western slope of the Sierra Nevada and a portion of the Cascade Range. The area extends from southern Lassen County to northern Fresno County, and covers the eastern portions of the Sacramento River and San Joaquin River hydrologic regions.

California has other sources of water: underground water, ocean water, springs, meadows and marshes. But the only source of water in the mountain counties is the rainwater or snow that falls from the sky.

The forests on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada capture the precipitation that forms in the air currents over the Pacific Ocean— warm rain from the southwest and cold rain or snow from the northwest. Cold mountain temperatures during the winter act as a giant refrigerator, holding the water as snowpack until spring thaws melt the accumulated snow. The waters that run down the mountains into streams and rivers provide most of the water that all Californians depend upon. During dry years, there is no snowpack, and when warm spring rainstorms melt the snow early (the Pineapple Express), flooding occurs downstream.

In the mountain counties, a small number of people are spread throughout in small towns and ranches and farms. Historically, they have been at a political disadvantage relative to the coastal and inland metropolitan areas. The U.S. Census Bureau in 2010 counted the population in the mountain counties at roughly .035 percent of the state's total population.

Mountain counties water interests banded together in early 1950s, to form Mountain Counties Water Resources Association, to work with the state Department of Water Resources as the State Water Project and the Central Valley Project were starting to deliver water through the Delta to parts of the Bay Area, the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.

Before the series of dams and reservoirs were built that comprised the two water projects, California passed two statutes that favor the claims of rural areas over the demands of larger, more populated areas in the state.

The County of Origin statute and the Watershed of Origin statute, known as "area of origin" laws, were meant to guarantee that water-rich areas would not be impoverished by losing the use of water in their areas when the projects started shipping water elsewhere.

In 1972 Congress passed the Clean Water Act, regulating discharges of pollutants into the waters of the United States

and regulating quality standards for surface waters.

In 1973 Congress passed the Endangered Species Act, which provides a program for the conservation of threatened and endangered plants and animals and the habitats in which they are found.

In 1992, California passed the Central Valley Project Improvement Act to address the impacts of the Central Valley Project on fish and wildlife and associated habitats.

In 2005, the California Department of Water Resources recognized and established the Mountain Counties as an “Area of Interest,” along with the Delta, in the “California Water Plan Update: A Blueprint for Sustainability.”

In 2009, California passed the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay Delta Reform Act. In this statute, the Legislature found “the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta watershed and California’s water infrastructure are in crisis and existing Delta policies are not sustainable. Resolving the crisis requires fundamental reorganization of the state’s management of Delta watershed resources.”

The first three laws resulted in additional regulations. Non-compliance results in fines or possible loss of operating licenses or water rights. The last one poses a potential threat to the protections of the “area of origin” laws.

In the present day, water districts in the Mountain Counties, as stewards of water resources, provide water for drinking and other domestic uses, business and industrial uses, hydroelectric power, flood protection, agricultural irrigation, protection for endangered or threatened fish and other species, and recreation. Many of them provide recycled water and wastewater treatment.

After 60 years of working informally with state and local water officials, Mountain Counties members took strong action last year to increase their investment in formal representation before government decision makers and in education about water as a natural resource.

“We wanted our face to be seen,” said Mountain Counties President Bill George.

They selected someone with knowledge of the water issues and familiarity with leaders in the water world to be that face. John Kingsbury, a longtime resident of El Dorado County, took office as executive director in March 2011. He had worked in customer services management for both El Dorado Irrigation District and Placer County Water Agency for a total of over 22 years.

The first thing Kingsbury did was to contact each of the members, find out their issues and sometimes tour their operations. Armed with this information, Kingsbury was able to represent the membership at the State Water Resources Control Board, Delta Stewardship Council, Bay Delta Conservation Plan and other agency hearings, and to speak knowledgeably with state and federal legislators, department staff and others.

At many of the hearings, he has brought managers of different member water districts to testify directly, telling the stories of their successes and challenges. This past year, Mountain Counties provided input to the proposed Delta Plan, the Bay Delta Conservation Plan and the State Water Plan for 2013.

The relationship with the Association of California Water Agencies has been strengthened. The two organizations worked together and with water agencies and statewide associations and organizations representing business and agricultural interests to form an Ag-Urban Coalition and submit an alternate Delta Plan to the Delta Stewardship Council.

Mountain Counties and ACWA jointly sponsor quarterly membership meetings that feature panel discussions by experts in water and allied fields from around the state. Interested parties are invited, although seating is limited. The next meeting will be on Friday, June 15, at El Dorado Irrigation District.

The theme is “Ecosystem Management Strategy for the Sierra Nevada: Connecting Land and Water.” The presenters are Roger Bales, PhD, Director of Sierra Nevada Research Institute, UC Merced; and William Stewart, PhD, director of the Center for Forestry, UC Berkeley. Also making a presentation on a Ditch Sustainability Study is Barbara Balen,

Tuolumne Utilities District director and Mountain Counties board member.

In October 2011, Mountain Counties became a founding member of the North State Water Alliance, a rural-urban partnership of more than 150 cities, counties, water suppliers, businesses and community groups. Other founding members are: Sacramento Metro Chamber, Northern California Water Resources Association, Regional Water Authority, and Sacramento Area Council of Governments.

Kingsbury has developed a network of information to provide education to members and the public. The Website, mountaincountieswater.com, contains posts and articles on current water issues. He speaks at community groups and arranges other speakers. He is developing print, online and slideshow messages that members can publicize.

He organizes tours for people out of the area. On May 21, members of the Delta Stewardship Council, Department of Water Resources, State Water Resources Control Board and the State Assembly will tour some of the local water projects to show the beneficial uses of water in the American River Watershed.

As statewide water planning proceeds, and challenges to managing water resources multiply, Mountain Counties Water Resources Association is now in a strategic position to represent the interests of the counties of origin.



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