

# 25 Successful Years of State Water

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Santa Barbara County's Plumbing Delivers Thousands of Acre Feet

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**Thursday, September 1, 2016**

By Ray Stokes

On August 1, 2016, the Central Coast Water Authority ( CCWA), the agency responsible for importing water from the State Water Project to the various cities, water districts, and other entities in Santa Barbara County, celebrated its 25th anniversary. It's a good time to reflect on the value of the State Water Project to Santa Barbara County.

Twenty-five years ago, the county experienced a major drought. At the time, we were isolated and had no plumbing connecting our region to the rest of California. As a result, we had no facilities to bring water here from places that had water to spare. Lake Cachuma was going dry, and the cities and water districts were running out of options. Were it not for the heavy rains dubbed the "March Miracle" in 1991, there was a real possibility of completely running out of water.

In June 1991, the voters spoke loudly and clearly: They wanted a diversified water supply that would avoid future hardships. Residents of a number of communities voted to authorize the issuance of bonds to construct the facilities needed to bring State Water into the county and thus connect the county to the vast State Water Project. Construction began in 1992 on the 144-mile buried pipeline and water treatment facilities to bring State Water from the California Aqueduct in Kern County to Lake Cachuma.

CCWA began its first State Water deliveries on August 4, 1997. Since that time, CCWA has delivered just under 400,000 acre-feet of water to county residents. The importation of State Water has helped replenish the overdrafted ground water basins in the county; those basins are helping meet the public's need for water during the current drought.

In order to save money on construction of the State Water facilities, CCWA elected to deliver State Water for the south coast agencies of Goleta, Santa Barbara, Montecito, and Carpinteria directly into Lake Cachuma thereby allowing those agencies to use existing facilities to pump water out of the lake. Since the beginning of the drought, CCWA has delivered around 28,000 acre-feet of water into Lake Cachuma, or about 2,000 acre-feet less than the total water delivered by the four South Coast water agencies in 2015. CCWA continues to pump as much water into Lake Cachuma as it possibly can, 24 hours a day, to meet the demands of south coast residents.

While this drought has gone down in the record books as the worst in California history, perhaps the most significant benefit of the State Water Project is the plumbing system, or the aqueducts, pipes, and other facilities that allow us to move water from virtually anywhere in the state into Santa Barbara County.

In calendar years 2014 and 2015, the dry conditions in Northern California meant that the State of California was only able to provide 5 percent and 20 percent of the water CCWA's contract calls for, or 2,275 and 9,097 acre-feet respectively. Those amounts were not sufficient to meet the needs of CCWA's customers. This problem was successfully solved because we were able to purchase additional water supplies from other parts of the state and get the extra water to Santa Barbara County because we're connected to the statewide plumbing system. Since 2014, CCWA has acquired almost 26,000 acre-feet of supplemental water supplies at a cost of \$11.6 million. Some of this water is currently in storage and will be available to meet the needs of the South Coast water users for the next year and beyond.

While we were all hoping that the expected El Niño would bring sufficient precipitation to fill Lake Cachuma this past winter, the typical pattern of a wetter Southern California and drier Northern California was reversed. All the major Northern California reservoirs filled, which allowed Department of Water Resources to increase the delivery percentage to 60 percent. For CCWA, that equates to a little over 27,000 acre-feet; significantly more than the prior two years; this further eased the strain felt by the CCWA project participants in trying to manage water supplies in this drought.

The doom and gloom predicted 25 years ago by many of the local critics of the State Water Project has not materialized. In fact, in five years, the bonds issued by CCWA to construct CCWA-owned facilities will be paid in full, which will reduce the annual project costs by about \$11 million.

CCWA is the only agency in the county that has the ability to bring additional water into the county. There's no question that without the State Water Project and our vital connection to the statewide plumbing system, Santa Barbara County would be in a much worse water supply situation than is currently the case.

*Ray Stokes is executive director of the Central Coast Water Authority.*

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