

All for one and water for all

A state grant will help agencies fund an underground bank for droughts.

Sacramento Bee - 9/3/02

By Stuart Leavenworth, staff writer

In a rare triumph for regional cooperation, a group of Sacramento-area water agencies has landed a \$22 million state grant to develop an innovative water-sharing program.

The money will be used to store river water underground during wet years and withdraw it during dry ones, creating a subterranean bank aimed at cushioning the region against droughts.

Officials say the funding is significant because it shows the region can compete with larger water fiefdoms for state money.

"I'd put this under the category of progressive water management," said Ed Winkler, executive director of the Regional Water Authority, an umbrella group for local water purveyors. "We have to make the most out of what we've got, especially during a period when it is hard to build new water facilities."

Made up of 18 local agencies, the Regional Water Authority was formed last year to bring cohesion to the area's water bureaucracies, and increase their collective clout. Most of the authority's agencies and companies are north of the American River; together, they serve more than half a million people.

The authority will use the \$22 million grant to build pipelines, pumps and other facilities to store, treat and move water around an area north of the American River.

"In the past, (as separate entities) we would have stood little chance of receiving this kind of funding," said Winkler, noting that big water agencies in Southern California tend to receive most state grants.

Now, the Regional Water Authority has the size and grant-writing capabilities to compete for funds, he said. The \$22 million grant, for instance, came from the state Department of Water Resources, which administers some of the funds created by the Proposition 13 water bond two years ago.

An outgrowth of the 1990s Water Forum pact, the push to bank groundwater represents a fundamental shift for the region. Most water agencies traditionally have relied on their own supplies during droughts. Some are dependent on river water and others rely on groundwater, which has been depleted because of overuse in many parts of the region.

Under a program of "conjunctive use," water purveyors will start sharing their liquid assets. Agencies like the San Juan Water District, which depends on surface water, will

lend any excess water it has to groundwater-dependent agencies such as the Sacramento Suburban Water District.

Proponents note several benefits, including less evaporation of water, since the water is being held underground instead of in a surface reservoir.

In addition, conjunctive use may help the American River, said Winkler, because agencies can withdraw stores of groundwater during droughts instead of relying on supplies from Folsom Reservoir or the river downstream.

For all these reasons, a state and federal program called Cal-Fed has endorsed conjunctive use. Cal-Fed has a goal of creating 1 million acre feet of additional water storage -- enough for 2 million households -- through groundwater storage projects.

That goal faces some hurdles, such as underground pollution, which could make some potential sites unsuitable for storage.

Conjunctive use also must not harm "historic users of groundwater" such as private well owners, according to a recent report by the Natural Heritage Institute, an environmental group that supports many groundwater projects.

Members of Regional Water Authority

- California-American Water Company
- Carmichael Water District
- Citrus Heights Water District**
- Del Paso Manor Water District
- Fair Oaks Water District**
- Florin Resource Conservation District/Elk Grove Water Service
- City of Folsom
- Fruitridge Vista Water Company
- City of Lincoln
- Orange Vale Water Company
- Placer County Water Agency**
- Rancho Murieta Community Services District
- City of Roseville**
- Rio Linda/Elverta Community Water District
- City of Sacramento**
- Sacramento Suburban Water District**
- San Juan Water District**
- Southern California Water Company

**Denotes agencies that will receive portion of \$22 million grant.