

What you can do

Contact Mayor Villaraigosa: ⁱ

- Ask him to honor Los Angeles’ obligations by ensuring DWP fully recovers Owens Valley water tables.

Contact the LA Board of Water and Power Commissioners: ⁱⁱ

- Ask that they reduce the Department of Water and Power’s (DWP’s) pumping sufficiently to lower long-term average pumping to the 70,000 acre feet per year ceiling recommended by the US Geological Survey.
- Ask that they direct DWP to manage for full recovery of water tables the agency drew down in the late 1980s.

Contact Inyo County Supervisors: ⁱⁱⁱ

- Ask him/her to insist that DWP fully recover water tables to comply with the Long Term Water Agreement’s requirement that pumping be managed to avoid impacts.

Stay informed:

- Join the Owens Valley Committee or visit our website at www.ovcweb.org for the latest information.
- Visit the Bristlecone Chapter of the California Native Plant Society website at www.bristleconecnps.org to find out about field trips to meadows and pumped sites.
- Visit the Inyo County Water Department website at www.inyowater.org to obtain technical reports and legal documents.

U.S. Geological Survey estimate of maximum long-term average pumping consistent with LTWA environmental protection requirements	70,000 acre feet per year
Actual long-term average pumping as reported by Los Angeles DWP in 2006	94,809 acre feet per year

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ⁱⁱ Board of Water and Power Commissioners, Room 1555-H, 15th floor, 111 North Hope Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012
ⁱⁱⁱ PO Box N, Independence, CA 93526

Owens Valley Committee
P.O. Box 77
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....What groundwater problem?

EVERY STEP NOW TAKEN SHOWS YOU THAT NATURE HAS BEEN LAVISH OF HER STORES. THE MOUNTAINS ARE FILLED WITH TIMBER, THE VALLEYS WITH WATER AND MEADOWS OF LUXURIANT GRASS. SOME OF THE MEADOWS CONTAIN, AT A MODERATE ESTIMATE, TEN THOUSAND ACRES, EVERY FOOT OF WHICH CAN BE IRRIGATED.

--CAPTAIN J.W. DAVIDSON
DESCRIBING OWENS VALLEY IN 1859



Stephen Ingram

Many people know the story of Los Angeles’ Owens Valley land and water “grab” in the early 1900s. While this resulted in the destruction of Owens Valley’s agricultural economy, diversion of the lower Owens River, and drying of Owens Lake, groundwater-dependent resources such as meadows were not as seriously affected.

Not as seriously affected, that is, until 1971, when Los Angeles completed the second barrel of its aqueduct and began pumping massive amounts of groundwater. Springs dried up and plants died. Inyo County sued, arguing that an Environmental Impact Report was required under the California Environmental Quality Act. Two inadequate EIR’s and 19 years of litigation later, Inyo County and Los Angeles signed the historic Inyo-LA Long Term Water Agreement (LTWA) in 1991. The Agreement includes measures to mitigate pumping impacts and requires that pumping be managed to “avoid” significant new environmental impacts while providing a “reliable” water supply to LA. Both Inyo and Los Angeles made concessions to reach this historic compromise.

So what’s all the fuss about groundwater pumping?



PERMANENT DRAWDOWNS

What’s at stake

When European-Americans arrived in Owens Valley they were amazed at the expansive meadows. In 1864 William Brewer of the California Geological Survey observed “nine or ten square miles of the best grass I have seen in the state” at one of his Owens Valley camps.

As recently as 1987, more than 40,000 acres of alkali meadow remained on the Valley floor. This habitat is rare in California and is home to rare plants, animals and birds. It provides forage for livestock and opportunities for hunting and other outdoor recreation.

Intact meadows also protect air quality by stabilizing dust. Unfortunately, meadows’ dependence on shallow groundwater makes them vulnerable to pumping-induced water table drawdowns.

What went wrong?

During the 19 years of litigation that led to the Long Term Water Agreement (LTWA), Los Angeles’ groundwater pumping caused enormous water table drawdowns and associated environmental impacts. After signing the LTWA in 1991, the Department of Water and Power (DWP) allowed water tables to

gradually rise for the rest of the decade. In 2001, however, DWP interpreted language in the LTWA’s Environmental Impact Report to mean a recovery of 80% of the water table drawdown was all that was necessary. As a result, over Inyo County’s objections, DWP abandoned efforts to fully recover water tables and increased pumping. In 2004 DWP stated it wanted to increase pumping even more.

Plans for increased pumping stalled in 2005 when an Inyo County Superior Court judge ordered a temporary reduction of DWP pumping as part of sanctions imposed because DWP had failed to complete the re-watering of the lower Owens River, a groundwater pumping mitigation project required under the LTWA. DWP’s pumping has been so excessive, however, that water tables have failed to fully recover even after the

court-ordered pumping reduction in combination with two of the highest run-off years in history (2005 and 2006).

Even camels need water

The LTWA is based on the camel model. Just as camels may survive periods without water while traveling to the next oasis, data suggest groundwater-dependent meadows may tolerate periodic water



table drawdowns of “one-to-several years” followed by water table recovery. Instead of “one-to-several year” drawdowns, however, in some areas drawdowns have effectively become permanent: Under current management practices, water tables will not recover.

= DESERTIFICATION

Just as camels unable to reach an oasis will certainly die, so will meadows denied access to sufficient groundwater. Field monitoring data, satellite imagery, and repeat photography all confirm meadow degradation is occurring in areas of non-recovered water tables.

Rather than acknowledge the obvious, in 2005 DWP simply denied the concept of groundwater dependence, dismissing it as just Inyo’s “opinion”—a remarkable assertion, given the facts that groundwater dependence was first documented by a DWP engineer almost a century ago, is used 63 times in the LTWA and associated EIR, and is the basis of the LTWA’s vegetation classification.

The sad truth is that it’s cheaper for DWP to violate the LTWA by pumping excessive amounts of water and to risk litigation than it is to reduce pumping and acquire water elsewhere. Chairman of the LA Board of Water and Power Commissioners Dominic Rubalcava boasted in 2001 that DWP’s litigation budget alone is larger than Inyo County’s entire

annual budget. DWP General Manager Gerald Gewe stated unequivocally in 2002 that litigation is cheaper than water.

Good faith and public opinion

In 1991 LA Mayor Tom Bradley said the signing of the LTWA meant Inyo and LA would become collaborators instead of adversaries. Mayor Richard Riordan said it marked a “new era of cooperation.” Unfortunately, the good faith among political leaders that gave rise to the LTWA evaporated on the way to DWP management.

Inyo County citizens cannot vote in LA elections to remove those responsible for DWP’s cynical policies. Nor does Inyo County have financial resources to litigate every time DWP violates the LTWA. In the long run, public opinion is the only power potentially strong enough to force DWP to implement the LTWA in good faith. DWP’s illegal management practices are carried out in the name of citizens of Los Angeles. They will cease only when the citizens of Los Angeles insist that they cease.

In 2005, Los Angeles voters elected Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who subsequently declared his administration’s

“absolute commitment” to honor its Owens Valley obligations regarding environmental protection. Whether Villaraigosa’s appointees on the Los Angeles Board of Water and Power will translate the mayor’s rhetoric into full water table recovery as required by the LTWA remains to be seen.

