

# A new era for Lower Owens

Inyo and Los Angeles officials release water into channel for first time since 1913 diversions

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The gushing rhetoric rolled into the air in upbeat waves of words and phrases declaring a new day, a new era, a historic beginning. Those dramatic utterances were followed by what seemed to many an almost anticlimactic trickle of water released into the Lower Owens River Wednesday.

But since Los Angeles officials were feeling generous — “there it is, take it back,” said one big city bigwig about the water that had since 1913 been sent south to the Los Angeles — the crowd took whatever water it could get. (Especially since they were standing in the “Eastern Sahara,” according to a red-faced someone whose Freudian slip showed during his remarks.)

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and Inyo County Supervisor Susan Cash hit a button that lowered the gate to send water into the concrete channel. It was barely enough water to get the still pool of water already in the channel moving toward the dirt riverbank downstream, but, again, it was a start.

And that was the theme of the day: “We’ve started down a new path, and although there’s a long way to go, we’re going to stay the path, togeth-



Hundreds of people lined the concrete diversion structure at the L.A. Aqueduct Intake Wednesday to watch water be released down the Lower Owens River for the first time since the aqueduct went into operation in 1913. Photo by Jon Klusmire.

But there were some not-so-subtle reminders that L.A. had made a lot of promises it needed to keep, and that there was a difference between a river and “that ditch,” as the L.A. Aqueduct was called by an Inyo partisan.

Regardless of the ripples of tension just below the surface of the fast talk and slow moving water, the Lower Owens River Project Water Release Ceremony was a time for everyone to put on a happy face, get under the

same tent, pull up their hip waders and splash around in and enjoy one of the rare moments in the Owens Valley’s tumultuous water history when the focus was clearly on the water, not the war over the water.

It was water that was being diverted from “the ditch” heading to Los Angeles into a riverbed that had been dry since 1913.

It was water that would create 62 river miles of fishing, bird watching and recreational opportunities for vis-

itors and residents alike.

It was water that would help all manner of vegetation sprout, from towering cottonwoods to innocent willows, along the new riverbank.

It was water that will attract wildlife, from birds to deer to crawdads to frogs and from bass to catfish to the living river.

That such a miraculous transformation was still at least five if not seven years away didn’t dissuade the

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distinguished speakers at the event from plunging headfirst into that hoped-for future and declare simply getting the water turned into the river channel was a symbolic moment, a unique time, and maybe even a turning point in the history of the relationship between Los Angeles and the Owens Valley.

A crowd of close to 500 gathered at the L.A. Aqueduct Intake by 11 a.m. to witness history in the making. They were not disappointed by the speakers, who delivered plenty of sincere apologies, promises, laugh lines and applause lines, topped by the cute Freudian slip that drew hoots and hollers.

Villaraigosa made heads turn and television cameras churn when he walked onto the scene across the bridge at the southern end of the diversion structure.

During what turned into a walking press conference, Villaraigosa gave a hint of the conciliatory, and frank tone he was going to take with regard to the Owens Valley and Los Angeles.

He said the LORP work "should have never taken this long," and it "should never had to come down to a lawsuit" to get the city to do what it had promised to do for years, namely put water back into the Lower Owens River.

Villaraigosa said for the first but not the last time that he and his administration, which includes the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, remains "absolutely committed" to taking care of its environmental responsibilities in the Owens Valley.

After the big talks in the big tent and the "big" water release moment, Villaraigosa said that he was aware of the "bitter feelings and anger" expressed by Owens Valley residents about any proclamation of a "new course" by L.A. "We haven't been the greatest partners with the Owens Valley" over the past 90 years, he said. That's about how long the Lower Owens has been dry, thanks to the river water being diverted to the L.A. Aqueduct in 1913.

But he again pounded home his main theme, that "this is the beginning of a new chapter that will lead to a real partnership" between the city, LADWP, Inyo County and the citizens of the valley.

The beginning of the LORP water flows "sets the foundation

for more restoration" and environmental work by LADWP in the valley, he said.

"We can't keep violating our environment without consequences," said Villaraigosa. The "respect for the land, water and air" that local Paiute and Shoshone residents talked to the mayor about personally "is something that is also deep within me," he said. "It's a personal passion."

To translate his passion and concern into action will take time, and as people see his administration is committed to the environment in general, and in the Owens Valley in particular, "we can build on this and begin to have a more positive impact" on the valley, Villaraigosa said.

The Lower Owens River was more than a symbol for making right an environmental wrong, he noted, "it's about the future of our kids."

Earlier, Villaraigosa made his first big splash when he stopped to talk to the students from Round Valley and Owens Valley schools seated on the ground under the big tent set up next to the diversion structure.

After telling them, "this is a historic day," and then asking some questions he plunged into the middle of the youngsters and waved and smiled like a kid.

After dis-entangling himself from his newest best friends, the mayor joined the other speakers on the dais.

The "history" theme came early and often.

President of the L.A. Board of Water and Power Commission David Nahai said the day was "a wonderful, magical occasion," and it was "truly history making" to be on hand to help the "rebirth of a river." The ongoing work on LORP will "showcase the capabilities of L.A. and Inyo County."

Nahai said the LORP was "emblematic of a new way of thinking, a new environmental ethos" created by the mayor and his administration. That meant L.A. keeping its promises about Mono Lake, the Owens River Gorge, the Owens Dry Lake and the LORP.

"Please don't ever think the water from this lovely place is taken for granted, we prize it," Nahai said.

The message of the day, Nahai said, was "there it is, take it back," a sentiment that drew applause and laughter from those who recognized it as a slight twist on the comment made by DWP's first

boss and aqueduct-builder William Mullholland, when Owens River water tumbled out of the aqueduct and into the L.A. basin in 1913: "There it is, take it."

Then Villaraigosa took over.

This was a "day for history that reverberates far and wide." Pushing a button to send water down the river, "will do more than right historic wrongs," he said. It signals a "time for all of us to change course."

Harking back to the Mullholland era and the "water wars," Villaraigosa said it was clear the past had created "environmental degradation in the Eastern Sahara."

After a second, the slip of tongue prompted hundreds to laugh out loud.

Without skipping a beat, Villaraigosa said, "hey that was actually pretty good. It did create a Sahara."

More laughter, more nodding heads.

The point, he said, was that Los Angeles was "prepared to live up to its history," and the LORP will not only be a "recreational bonanza" for the Eastern Sierra, but also a "shining example of new partnership" between the city and the Owens Valley.

Even though it took Judge Lee Cooper to order the LADWP to complete the LORP, "my administration has an absolute commitment" to not only LORP, but to "in the years to come, build on today and do more."

"I'm honored to be here with all of you," he concluded. "A new chapter of history will start when we open those gates."

The day was not just "historic," but also "exciting," said Susan Cash, chair of the Inyo County Board of Supervisors. She noted that opening the gates was "only the beginning," since the county and LADWP were committed to cooperatively managing LORP "forever."

Cash said the only reason the fateful day had even arrived was because of the dedication of groups such as the Sierra Club, the Owens Valley Committee, Inyo County, the county's residents, LADWP "and all the other people who cared that when promises are made those promises need to be kept."

That line got the most applause of the day.

Also getting a giggle, and a few snorts, was the comment from LADWP Commissioner Mary

Nichols, who quipped that "DWP releases no drop of water ahead of its time," but letting that water go down the river was "what we are here to do today."

While not armed with glib one-liners, getting a chance to talk and to be included in the same tent as everyone else was seen as progress by Mark Bagley of the Sierra Club - "it's a great project to bring life to a river - and Carla Scheidlinger of the OVC, who said she, like others, hoped the event would usher in "a new era of cooperation with LADWP" and the Owens Valley.

After having to almost wrestle his way to the podium because of some confusion, former Inyo County Supervisor Keith Bright provided some historical perspective (and said probably what every other speaker thought: "I was told I would have three minutes to talk; I can't say 'good morning' in three minutes.")

Bright recalled "how we got here," and noted the fight in the 1970s when L.A. and Inyo County were "at each other's throats," fighting over water with lawsuits and legal maneuvers. That fight came to an end after "tough negotiations" that led to the Long-Term Water Agreement, which included the LORP, he noted. The "fight" also included an unsuccessful recall of Bright and two other supervisors, yet another reminder that even Inyo County rarely speaks with one voice about water.

Finally, then-L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley and Bright signed the Water Agreement in 1991, which was "a very proud day," Bright said.

"I didn't think it would take 14 years" to actually get the LORP started, Bright said. "I'm glad enough I lived long enough to see it done."

Then Bright put a few things into perspective when it comes to water in general, and what is likely still the reigning sentiment about L.A. in the Owens Valley.

He told the mayor to "look at those mountains," as he pointed to the Sierra that formed the backdrop for the ceremony.

"God willing, there will be enough snow on those mountains to fill that ditch and the Lower Owens River."

During the applause, no one had to explain the difference between the "ditch" that still takes the valley's water to a thirsty Los Angeles and Inyo County's new stretch of river.