

County concerned about plan's conflicts with Water Agreement

LADWP's proposal for lessees to save water via sprinkler irrigation prompts request for Standing Committee consult

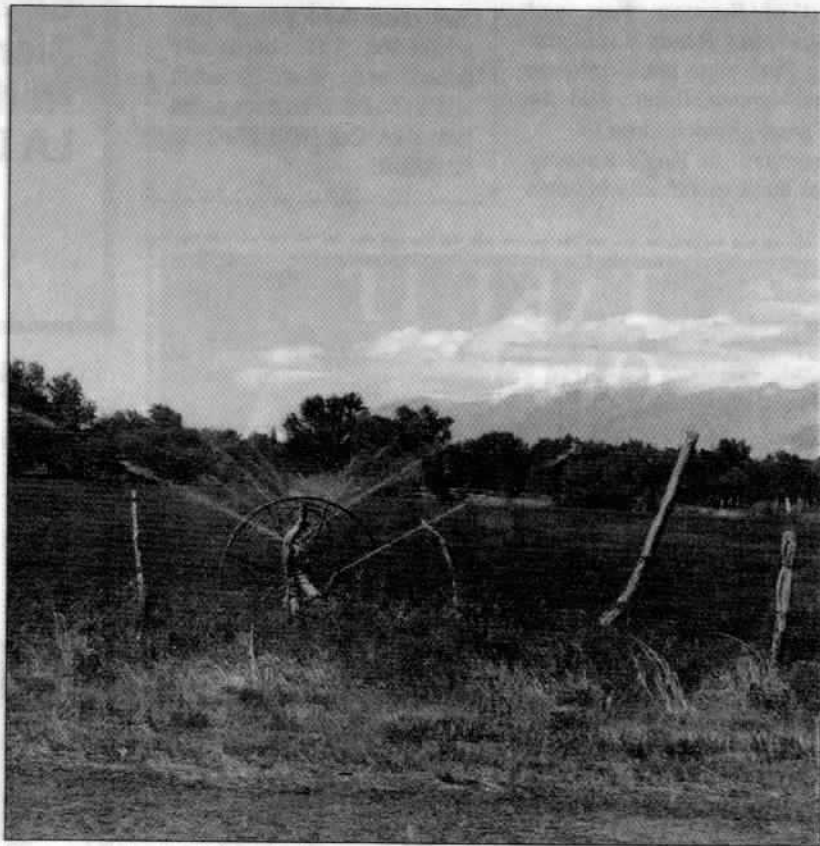
By Jon Klusmire 10-8-05
Register Staff

Inyo County wants to see a downpour of paperwork hit the ground before less water comes gushing out of sprinkler systems to irrigate the valley's pastures and alfalfa fields.

Besides full documentation of all the potential impacts that might spring up from any reduction in the amount of irrigation water used in the valley, the county said the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power should present all the details of its proposed "Sprinkler Irrigation Water Conservation Incentive Program" to the Technical Group and the Inyo-L.A. Standing Committee before proceeding with the plan.

Comments from the Inyo County Water Department on the proposal point out that any reduction or change in the amount of irrigation water on leased LADWP ranch land or, more importantly, on Enhancement and Mitigation projects, could be a violation of the Inyo-L.A. Long-Term Water Agreement. As such, the only way to change the irrigation "duty" on those lands would be, at the least, to have the Standing Committee approve the changes or, in some cases, have the changes reflected in the LTWA.

The conservation program being proposed by LADWP would provide financial incentives to lease holders who are currently using sprinkler irrigation systems on their lands. The program would reduce lease payments based on the amount of water saved. Under the Water Agreement, those ranch lands are designated to



A proposal by LADWP to help ranchers upgrade old, leaky sprinklers, such as the one shown above, has been greeted by Inyo County with a long list of questions and concerns. Photo by Jon Klusmire

receive 5 acre-feet of water per acre per year for irrigation.

When announcing the program, Brian Tillemans, watershed resource manager for LADWP, pointed out that the program would be voluntary and not affect a significant amount of land, about 1,989 acres. The water savings would also be modest, with savings of about 3,000 a.f. of water a year, at most. Tillemans added that many lessees using sprinkler systems already use less water than the 5 a.f. dedicated to their lands.

The amount of land affected and the potential amount of water saved, however, are immaterial when it comes to compliance with the LTWA, according to the Water Department.

"The city shall not reduce the amount of water that it provides for uses in the Owens Valley" as outlined

in the LTWA, according to the recent court ruling that imposed sanctions on LADWP for failing to meet numerous deadlines for the Lower Owens River Project, the Water Department comments note. But it appears the proposed conservation program would reduce those in-valley water uses, and the Environmental Impact Report for the irrigation project should address the project's compliance with the court order.

The Water Agreement also outlines "irrigation practices," including the mandated 5 a.f. per acre of irrigation water for the lands in question, and the proposal appears to create changes in those "irrigation practices" that need to be documented in the EIR, according to the Water Department.

About 326 acres of land that could See **CONCERN**, page A-5

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see a reduction in irrigation water are Enhancement and Mitigation measures, and any modification or change in irrigating those lands must be approved by the Standing Committee, the Water Department states. Plus, the county, not LADWP, would be the government preparing the EIR or other environmental documents that would address changes to Enhancement or Mitigation projects, it adds.

Since the Water Agreement and 1991 Environmental Impact Statement both state "a firm allocation of 5 a.f. per acre" of irrigation water be provided to "Type E" vegetation (pastures and alfalfa fields), any decrease in that water allocation could impact vegetation on LADWP lands. Thus, a vegetation monitoring system should be implemented by LADWP to document any "significant changes" in irrigated land or vegetation, the Water Department states.

Additional vegetation that has sprung up because of current irrigation practices, whether that vegetation is growing along irrigation ditches or at the edges of fields where it depends on excess irrigation water, seepage or runoff from irrigated fields, must also be documented, monitored and not impacted by the proposed sprinkler conservation program, the Water Department contends.

The Water Department is also asking LADWP to study any potential impact on groundwater recharge caused by less irrigation water being placed on the valley's pastures and fields.

The county also wants to see a full accounting of any changes to the actual amount of land now being irrigated with sprinkler systems. It pointed out that if a center-pivot sprinkler replaces a "wheel row" sprinkler system (basically creating a circle of irrigated land instead of a square), there should be guarantees that the result should be that the exact same amount of acreage remains fully irrigated.

The Water Department also raised the issues of "cumulative impacts," based on two types of actions which have been put in place, but not fully explained or

detailed to the county. One is an LADWP effort "which has resulted in an ongoing reduction in the amount of stockwater" supplied to lessees. Stockwater is an additional allocation of irrigation water above and beyond the 5 a.f. per acre duty.

"We understand," the Water Department wrote, that LADWP has also instituted a program in the past three years to supply land designated for "recreational uses" with an allotment of 5 a.f. per acre. "We assume this could mean that some areas supplied with more water in the past may have experienced a reduction in supply," the department wrote.

The EIR for the irrigation program should "acknowledge these projects and activities" and the irrigation project analysis should include the "cumulative effect" of less stockwater, less recreational land watering and, finally, less irrigation water being applied to fields.

The program was designed to save lessees money and LADWP water, but would not reduce the acreage being irrigated and could, in some cases, actually increase yields, said Tillemans.

The program would be voluntary and be available only to lessees who currently use sprinklers to water grazing or alfalfa fields, he said.

Currently, there are about 1,989 acres of alfalfa fields or grazing pastures in Inyo County being irrigated by sprinkler systems. Included in that total are about 326 acres of land with sprinkler irrigation that are designated as Enhancement or Mitigation projects.

The 1,989 sprinklered acres of ranch land in Inyo County represent a tad more than 10 percent of all nearly 18,500 acres of LADWP land being leased and irrigated in Inyo and Mono counties.

Many lessees currently using sprinkler systems "typically don't use the full 5 a.f." per acre allotment, said Tillemans, just because sprinklers are far more efficient at getting the right amount of water to the right spots than flood irrigation.

Lessees who want to take

advantage of the program would receive guidance and assistance from LADWP to improve sprinkler systems' efficiency, through "non-structural improvements," according to the program description. However, LADWP will be offering some tips about how "better equipment can improve production" while using less water, said Tillemans.

At most, the sprinkler efficiency program would result in a reduction in irrigation water of just under 3,000 a.f. per year. And that's assuming every lessee takes advantage of the program and is able to reduce water use from 5 a.f. per acre to 3.5.

The financial incentives for saving water could be substantial for lessees. According to the plan, lessees would receive a 5 percent reduction in lease payments for each one-tenth of an acre-foot of water saved below the current allotment of five a.f. per acre of land. The maximum amount of the lease reduction under the program would be a 75 percent cut in lease payments for saving 1.5 a.f. of water per acre. Achieving that full 1.5 a.f. of water savings would reduce the amount of water the sprinklers spray per acre to 3.5 a.f. instead of 5 a.f.

The Water Department's concerns and comments on the sprinkler irrigation conservation program are similar to those lodged against a larger LADWP program to help all its lessees reduce irrigation water use. That program was approved by LADWP over the county's objections, but few if any lessees took advantage of the deal.

The county did move to put the larger conservation program on its list of "disputes" with LADWP, but no legal action has been taken on the dispute.