

Water authority leverages funds for regional projects



Alta Irrigation District General Manager Chris Kapheim views one of three cells that make up a new 28-acre stormwater recharge basin located west of Road 80 and south of Sierra Way. By: Linda Renn | The Sentinel

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Published: Thursday, January 5, 2012 10:06 AM PST

Since the formation of the Kings Basin Water Authority 10 years ago, the organization has received nearly \$29 million in local and state funds that have been used for water projects throughout the region.

"We have a very valuable resource here. We need to be good stewards of the water," Chris Kapheim, general manager of Alta Irrigation District, said.

In 2001, the KBWA began with the collaboration of four water agencies — the Kings River Conservation District, the Alta Irrigation District, the Consolidated Irrigation District, and the Fresno Irrigation District.

They formed a basin advisory panel with the purpose of working together to address water issues specific to the region. The group was initially called the Upper Kings Basin Water Forum.

However, in 2009 the name was changed to the Kings Basin Water Authority due to the multiple and diverse stakeholders.

Now, 49 interested parties participate in the KBWA process. These include the Sierra Club, Tulare Basin Wildlife Partners and several smaller irrigation districts and community services districts.

Eighteen members, including cities and irrigation districts, make up the KBWA board of directors.

The cost to be a member of KBWA is \$7,000 per agency. The fees mainly pay for technical help on updating plans and compliance costs.

The primary goal of the Kings Basin Water Authority is to tackle the overdraft of the groundwater. More than 10.8 million acre-feet of water has left the Kings River service area in the form of flood releases since the 1950s. As a result of the KBWA collaboration, they have been able to capture some overdraft. However, additional recharge basins are needed.

Other goals include dealing with local water supplies and water quality, especially in disadvantaged communities.

Over the past 40 years, the Fresno area's groundwater levels have dropped by 40 feet. The KBWA is also looking at improving surface water for cities with poor water quality.

Establishing the Kings Basin Water Authority has allowed the various water entities in the area to pool their resources to help build necessary infrastructure. The KBWA helps keep tax dollars local rather than it leaking out to areas outside the Central Valley.

"We all pay taxes here. A lot of the money doesn't come back here," Kapheim said.

The KBWA pursued funding from Prop. 13 and was successful which provided competition for Sacramento water entities. The Prop. 13 funding allowed KBWA to focus on flood control in Traver, water recharge, conservation and efficiency, and eastside water quality in Cutler and Orosi. After various cities began to get involved, the KBWA pursued more funding through Prop. 50 and was once again successful. The funds were granted only because of integrated planning and collaboration among multiple water entities and cities.

The Department of Water Resources called KBWA "a poster child for planning."

"It helped us realize long-term goals," Manager of Community and Public Relations at Kings River Conservation District, Cristel Tufenkjian, said.

Randy McFarland, communications consultant for the Friant Water Users Authority, said getting these funds wouldn't have been possible without having an integrated regional water management plan in place, which the KBWA has. This allows it to share in water bond funding.

Tufenkjian said the biggest benefit of the KBWA is the more than \$29 million that has been garnered to build water infrastructure throughout the Central Valley. Some projects have targeted problems on the east side of the Alta Irrigation District with water supply and water quality.

"We've had three projects with the city of Dinuba," Kapheim said.

Some projects completed over the past 10 years with assistance from the KBWA include:

- Alta Irrigation District coordinated groundwater storage project: A 28-acre, three-cell stormwater retention and recharge basin located in Dinuba and built with cooperation of the city. This \$1.3 million project west of Road 80 and south of Sierra Way was recently completed. The Alta Irrigation District's Traver Pond project is the enlargement of an existing five-acre recharge basin to a size of 16 acres.
- Upper Kings Basin Water Forum Project: Alta Irrigation District Traver Pond Project provides dry year supply and is a component of a surface water exchange agreement with Cutler and Orosi Public Utility Districts.
- Kings River Conservancy, Kings River Conservation District, and Upper Kings Basin Integrated Regional Water Management Authority (UKBIRWMA): Construction of a half-mile ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) trail, ADA bathroom and parking area, and rehabilitation of a one-mile rugged foot path along the Kings River below Pine Flat Dam.

- UKBIRWMA groundwater overdraft reduction and disadvantaged community water supply reliability: East Oroshi Community Service District's project rehabilitates two existing muni wells in a disadvantaged community to extract from a higher quality zone of the aquifer.

McFarland said most of the Kings River entities had previously worked independently prior to the formation of the KBWA.

"We have a greater appreciation for collaboration," he said. "The KR Fishery management, KRCD, Kings River Water Authority, Department of Fish and Game have come together."

McFarland said the KBWA is a concerted effort, almost unique around the state.

Kapheim agreed and said he has heard his constituents say that they want to see people work together where they can benefit the process. He said that is precisely what the KBWA is doing.

Kapheim said some water issues cannot be solved by individual entities, but need to be addressed through a collaborative effort which the KBWA has provided. Subsidence is one of those issues and water quality another.

"It's in our best interest to take advantage of every bit of water we have," Kapheim said.

He noted the water quality problems in Cutler and Oroshi. East Oroshi's problems are even worse with most residents using bottled water.

"The way we're going to have to go is with surface water," Kapheim said.