

Self reliance in the face of drought

The Replenish Big Bear project moves closer to the next phase

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Water. With it, there is life. Without it, there is drought, fire and impacts on community water supplies.

There has been no precipitation in Big Bear Valley in five of the last 11 months. Precipitation totals in another three months in 2020 — January, February and August — totalled 1.22 inches.

Big Bear, along with most of the state of California, is in a drought.

Unlike most of the state, Big Bear depends on Mother Nature for its water supply. There is no connection to the state aquifer system. That limitation to water resources was the impetus that created Replenish Big Bear, the water sustainability project proposed by several local government agencies and led by the Big Bear Area Regional Wastewater Agency. Other agencies involved include the Big Bear City Community Services District, the Big Bear Lake Department of Water and Power, and the Big Bear Municipal Water District.

The Replenish Big Bear concept is to provide water for Big Bear Lake through a process of capturing and purifying lost water through advanced treatment process including reverse osmosis. The supplemental water source will help restore lake levels and recharge groundwater levels with water that is purer than the water coming out of the tap. An estimated 800 million gallons of the Valley's water is disposed of each year. The goal is to be able to keep water in Big Bear rather than shipping it off the mountain.

For more information about the proposed project, visit the website replenishbigbear.com.



David Lawrence

Without the ability to recapture lost water, the only other alternative for Big Bear Valley is to connect to the state's water system. The nearest connection is in Lucerne Valley, according to BBARWA general manager David Lawrence. A study conducted five years ago found that connecting to the state system via pipelines to the Lucerne Valley connection is too costly. "It was estimated to cost \$80 million, and that was five years ago," Lawrence said.

The Replenish Big Bear plan, Lawrence said, is being developed to help maintain not only a viable water supply, but also the Valley's tradition of self reliance. "We have no alternative water supply," Lawrence said. "Right now our aquifer levels are keeping up (with demand) through community conservation practices with DWP and CSD. But that only takes you so far."

Because of COVID-19, Lawrence estimates Replenish Big Bear is about six months behind in developing a proposal for the California Regional Quality Water Board to review. But the time is

near, he said. A meeting is tentatively set for early February.

To date, Replenish Big Bear has received \$5 million in grants for the project. "We're hot and heavy going after other grants, too," Lawrence said.

Replenish Big Bear hired Michael Anderson, professor emeritus of soil chemistry and environmental sciences at University of California Riverside to develop a lake model to figure out what is needed to reach 70 percent reverse osmosis capability. Anderson developed a similar model for Lake Elsinore. The model calculates the amount of nutrients to be removed from the water to improve it to exceed drinking water standards. Nutrients that are removed would be dried and hauled off the mountain. The clean water would remain in Big Bear.

Reverse osmosis is the key, Lawrence said. "It's a perfect blend we are looking for," Lawrence said.

Lawrence said the Valley uses on average 3,000 acre feet of water a year. He estimates the Replenish Big Bear project could return 2,000 acre feet a year even under drought conditions.

Once the model is approved by the Regional Water Quality Board, Replenish Big Bear can move forward on the next phase of the proposal — a design concept, cost estimates and public input. Lawrence said he believes the Valley will stand behind the project. This is the first time that several different local government agencies have agreed on one goal. Self reliance is a big thing to many people who live on the mountaintop. "That's the whole point — to maintain self reliance and self sustainability," Lawrence said.

Editors note: This is the first in a series on Big Bear Valley water and the California drought.

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