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GUEST OPINION: Water future needs 'thorough' conversation, Gorin and McKenzie say

By JAKE McKENZIE and SUSAN GORIN

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Water. We have heard a lot lately about the drought that we are in and our water supply. As part of the Water Advisory Committee, which includes elected officials from all of the Sonoma County Water Agency contractors, we have learned firsthand how complex the issue is here in Sonoma County.

First, we want to congratulate all of you who have done an outstanding job of conserving water this spring and summer. As you probably read in The Press Democrat, almost all of the Water Agency contractors have met or exceeded their water conservation goals this summer.

In addition, due to our great conservation efforts, the Water Agency contractors have exceeded the 25 percent reduction in diversions mandated by the state water board and helped preserve the water supply in Lake Mendocino to provide for the fall run of the endangered fish species in the Russian River.

Water conservation is not something new to our residents. Our cities have been actively and aggressively developing water conservation programs that meet or exceed the California Urban Water Conservation Council's best management practices since the early 1990s.

Our communities are held up as models statewide for our innovative approaches to water conservation.

Our toilet rebate programs have replaced more than 143,500 toilets and provided rebates for 23,500 new high-efficiency washing machines in Sonoma and Marin counties.

Our rebates for water-conserving landscape and water-efficient appliances have been well accepted by our communities. Our irrigation efficiency and cash-for-grass programs have helped to remove acres of turf and replaced it with low-water-use alternatives.

Water conservation continues to be one of the cheapest forms of water supply. Not only does conservation provide water supply, but the more water we save, the less we need to process at our regional wastewater treatment plant.

By saving water, we can prolong the time when we will need to expand the treatment plant.

The more complex part of the problem is water supply and where we go in planning for current

and future needs. Most of us receive our water from the Sonoma County Water Agency. The majority of that water comes from the Russian River (via Lake Sonoma) and some ground water sources.

Based on a recent biological opinion, the flows in the Russian River and Dry Creek are adversely affecting federally listed coho and Chinook salmon and steelhead. That creates concerns as we plan for the long-term water supply needs of our area.

Planning for long-term supply is a difficult job and one that needs to be carefully and thoroughly discussed by all of us. We need to begin the discussion with the Water Agency now, because it will take longer than we think it will.

The solutions are not easy and will be costly. The sooner we get started, the better off we will be.

Additional conservation has to be a part of any solution. The Water Advisory Committee is already looking at regional programs that will enhance our current conservation efforts and help us manage water consumption in our communities.

It is up to all of us to be good stewards and ensure there is enough water to protect endangered fish and provide for the needs of the environment, agricultural, urban and recreational uses.

The water contractors stand ready to work collaboratively with the Sonoma County Water Agency as we look at alternative strategies to meet our ongoing and future water needs.

But we will need the participation of all of our residents in your ongoing commitment to saving this vital resource.

Jake McKenzie is a member of the Rohnert Park City Council and chairman of the Water Advisory Committee. Susan Gorin is mayor of Santa Rosa and vice chairwoman of the Water Advisory Committee.