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Water districts allowed to capture dam runoff

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State regulators on Tuesday approved allowing two Inland water agencies to capture runoff from Seven Oaks Dam, essentially giving them a drought bank that could supply more than 70,000 homes per year with water once lost to communities downstream.

The unanimous vote by the State Water Resources Control Board in Sacramento ends an 18-year quest by San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District and Western Municipal Water District in Riverside to divert Santa Ana River water.

Under the newly granted rights, trillions of gallons of water once lost to Orange County can now be stored in local underground basins or sent to treatment plants for immediate use.

"The timing is wonderful. We have this ability now to take water in wet years and store it for dry years," said John Rossi, general manager at Western Municipal, which provides residential and wholesale service in Riverside, Jurupa, Corona, Norco, Lake Elsinore, Murrieta and Temecula.

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Douglas Headrick, of the San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District, stands at Seven Oaks Dam. The State Water Resources Control Board issued a permit to capture more runoff behind the dam, rather than sending it down the Santa Ana River to Orange County.

"It's a huge win for our region and our watershed, that our local water is now allowed to be used for beneficial use instead of just running out to the ocean," he said.

The Seven Oaks Dam near Highland was built nine years ago to prevent flooding from snowmelt and rain runoff in the San Bernardino Mountains. But with drought, population growth and increasingly unreliable imports from Northern California, agencies began looking for new sources.

The river is slowed enough by the 550-foot dam to be caught then percolated into the ground. The river provides inexpensive and pristine water for drinking and other uses.

"The upstream areas need to capture and keep as much water as we possibly can for the benefit of our region," said Robert Neufeld, general manager of the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District, which holds Santa Ana River rights to recharge aquifers for local agencies.

Under an agreement with the state, Orange County is entitled to 42,000 acre-feet of Santa Ana River water per year. But the region had been receiving more like 190,000 acre-feet annually because it couldn't be captured, Rossi said.

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A view looking southwest from the top of Seven Oaks Dam, looking down the valley leading into the Mentone/Redlands area.

During heavy storms, much of the runoff continues to the ocean and is lost by local agencies.

San Bernardino Valley and Western are allowed to divert up to 158,000 acre-feet of water from the Santa Ana River and four tributary streams behind the dam. The average yearly runoff, however, is about 25,000 to 35,000 acre-feet, Rossi said.

One acre-foot, equal to 325,851 gallons, is enough to serve two typical families for a year.

The state board noted in its decision that the river flow is variable, from large floods to a trickle. It is one largest water right applications awarded in the state.

The water will be taken off the Santa Ana River below the dam using diversion structures owned by the conservation district. The structures are ridges across the river, which move water to the side and into a pit where it is funneled into a pipeline.

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The intake tower of Seven Oaks Dam. Under the newly granted rights, trillions of gallons of water once lost to Orange County can now be stored in local underground basins or sent to treatment plants for immediate use.

The diversion structures and pipelines will be improved over the next decade to allow more water capture, Rossi said.

The water will be used to recharge the sprawling San Bernardino Basin, which includes the Bunker Hill and Lytle Creek groundwater basins and provides water to almost a million people in the San Bernardino Valley and Riverside County.

Eventually, the districts may try to connect to a pipeline that would allow the excess runoff to be stored at Diamond Valley Lake in Hemet for exchange later, said Doug Headrick, deputy general manager at San Bernardino Valley.

"We're all about drought proofing," he said. "We put it in when times are good, we pump it out when times are dry."

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