

Water Policy, Urban Developers and Monkey Wrench Gangs

By Stuart H. Hurlbert and Kevin M. Doyle
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Recently, over 170 scientists and environmental leaders from San Diego County put out a call for the protection of the natural resources of the Salton Sea Basin and San Diego County. This "declaration" put forward facts and principles that should govern any decisions concerning the proposed transfer of water from the Imperial Valley to San Diego.

Despite its weighty collective authorship, local papers declined to print the declaration. But one of them did not hesitate to criticize it, stating that the signers were coming to the issue "at the 11th hour (with a)...last minute monkey wrench (and were all)...a little behind the learning curve on some very complex matters."

That is patently inaccurate and outright disrespectful to some of the top minds in San Diego. The principles and facts of the declaration have in fact been put forward in many venues and for many years. So only those not paying attention – or those opposed to these principles – should be surprised.

How then do such myopic plans get produced and survive this long in the political process? The answer, we believe, is simple. The structures and processes are flawed in fundamental ways.

This is exemplified by a key document, the City of San Diego's Strategic Plan for Water Supply, 1997-2015.

In 1996, the City Water Department was charged with determining the mix of water supply options (conservation, local development of sources, importation) that would best meet San Diego's needs up to the year 2015. A public advisory group was selected by then Mayor Golding's office. Meetings were held, technical information was provided by Water Department staff, and the strategic plan was issued in July 1997. This effort paralleled water planning activities at the County, State, SANDAG, and federal levels, all supporting the proposal to transfer large amounts of water from the Imperial Valley to San Diego.

A bad result for the strategic plan was predictable from the time the public advisory group was selected. Despite claims that the advisory group consisted of "a broad cross-section of business, farming, environmental, civic, and academic interests," it was in fact dominated by representatives of the urban development sector. This is seemingly true of most such official groups and boards of directors involved with regional planning in San Diego, so in that sense it was business as usual.

Of the 29 members of the public advisory group, 15 represented the housing industry, chambers of commerce, and business associations. One environmental group was represented. No demographers or political or social scientists were in the group. And no organization that advocates reduced rates of population growth was represented.

The following consequences were unsurprising.

First, the advisory group refused to challenge - or they simply overlooked - the implications of the City's claim that "imported water and water conservation are a way of life in San Diego because...water reliability is important to sustain an average annual [population] growth rate of 2%."

A 2% growth rate should not be an objective. Faced with such a rate, any responsible planning agency or group should be vocal in pointing out its dangers and in advocating steps to reduce it.

Second, during its initial deliberations the advisory group selected eight "critical evaluation criteria" with which to evaluate different water supply option mixes against each other. Environmental impacts were not among these and were considered of only secondary importance.

Third, the only information used to estimate environmental impacts was "the miles of new transmission main [pipelines] needed" for each alternative supply option. Regardless of where and how the water was to be obtained, the only

environmental impacts to be considered would be those of the bulldozers and backhoes!

In addition, the process failed by the City's own criteria. City Council policy No. 400-09 (1985) is "to support cost effective and environmentally sound activities that will bring required additional water to southern California without adversely affecting the interests of the areas of origin." Every analysis of the proposed transfer has shown that it will indeed greatly "adversely affect" the Salton Sea and the environment of the Imperial Valley.

Contrary to the implications of editorials in San Diego and Los Angeles newspapers, these crises concerning water supplies are neither created nor exacerbated by monkey wrench gangs of scientists and environmental leaders.

They are shaped and aggravated, however, by the seeming inability of the media and local elected officials to even talk about their fundamental causes – uncontrolled rates of population growth and an

inability of developer-friendly politicians to embrace principles of economic sustainability. Yet some critics have made the astounding claim that it is the environmental community that is being "terribly unfair" and failing to "take a longer term view".

Population stabilization, in the near term, is the only route to win-win-win solutions for urban dwellers, farmers, and the environment. Even Tom Levy, the general manager of the Coachella Valley Water District (one of the agencies involved in the proposed transfer), admitted to one of the authors of this article that until southern California addressed population issues, the water situation will become ever more desperate.

Until our local, state, and federal government officials -- along with the water agencies, the planning agencies, and the media -- are willing to confront, discuss, and deal directly with population growth issues, they themselves are the monkey wrench gang.

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