

Deal creates shared facilities near Seven Oaks Dam, more water stored

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Efforts to capture more water from the Santa Ana River took a step forward Wednesday when Inland agencies agreed to share recharge basins below the Seven Oaks Dam near Highland to allow them to store more water underground.

The deal is part of a larger effort to drought-proof the Inland region and make it less dependent on imported supplies that are gripped by drought and legal restrictions. Santa Ana River water can then be sent to homes and businesses for drinking and other purposes.

Under the agreement, 65 acres of recharge basins -- ponds that collect water that then percolates into aquifers - - owned and operated by Redlands-based San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District would be used by the San Bernardino Valley Water Municipal Water District and Riverside-based Western Municipal Water District, which serves the western half of Western Riverside County.

The deal, however, hinges on the State Water Resources Control Board approving rights of the two water agencies for the additional water that would collect behind the dam. Spokeswoman Kathie Smith said the board should vote on those permits by June. The permit process started in 1991.

Environmental groups had also asked the board to consider saving some river water for the endangered species that live below the dam and require occasional flooding to maintain their habitat. The Santa Ana sucker that lives farther downstream also would benefit.

"That was something the state board was wrestling with ... how to ensure that the resources were not shortchanged or impacted by" the water districts' request, said Ileene Anderson, ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Under the agreement signed Wednesday in San Bernardino, the two water agencies would pay the conservation district for operation and maintenance costs when water is percolated for them, said Marv Shaw, general manager of the conservation district.

John Rossi, general manager of Western Municipal, said eventually more recharge basins would be constructed, but this agreement allows the water-savings to start sooner.

Rossi said the agencies wanted to come to an agreement to show the state water board that they have the ability to do something with the water.

"We'd rather store it for another day than see it go out to the ocean," Rossi said.

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