

The Daily Transcript

The Business of Water: A conversation with Ken Weinberg

By Jeran Wittenstein

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As development and population swell in the San Diego region, so too does its need for water. It is estimated that 90 percent of San Diego's water is imported from outside the area, making it one of the most dependent large metropolitan cities in the country.

Since its inception in 1944, the San Diego County Water Authority has been dedicated to ensuring that the people of San Diego and its vibrant economy not only have access to water, but a sustained plan to meet the needs of future generations.

The Daily Transcript spoke with Ken Weinberg, director of water resources at the water authority, to capture a glimpse of the future of demand and supply, and how the agency plans to deal with it.

What will the San Diego County Water Authority look like 5, 10, 20 years down the road, in terms of where we get our water from and how much?

Five years from now we're going to look very different than we do today. Right now we're in the beginnings of our diversification program and this is really the lesson that we learned out of the last drought that we had from 1986-1992: You can't just rely on one source of supply. Since then we've been focused on diversifying our supplies -- and by "we," I mean the water authority and its member agencies -- and that's through water recycling, groundwater recovery, water conservation and now looking at sea water desalination.

I think the biggest change that we've seen and that we'll see in the next five years is that our water transfer program continues to pick up. That's the most significant accomplishment that the water authority has had since the drought -- our IID (Imperial Irrigation District) water transfer and the canal linings in Coachella and along the American Canal. So five years from now you're going to see more water

coming from those sources, you're going to see more water recycling than we are today.

New projects getting built will be coming on line. And I think that process is going to continue, so that 10, 15, years, 20 years from now you're going to wind up at a point where this county's water supply looks very different than it did five years ago from today, and different from what you will be seeing five years from now. It will be a much more fully diversified supply, with three sources of imported water: Metropolitan, the IID Transfer and water from the canal linings.

You're going to see more water recycling, more recovered groundwater. You're going to see the beginnings of sea water desalination and you're going to see continued success in conservation, so that if anything happens to one source of supply, we've spread our risk of shortage around, so that we're not dependent on a single source, not dependent on a single supplier, we're not dependant on just imported water like we have been.

What are some obstacles that might get in the way of meeting those goals?

Costs. That's always a challenge, especially when you're building facilities and developing supplies that have an intensive capital cost. Water recycling, seawater desalination, all that has capital costs. So that's always something that could potentially be an obstacle.

That's why we look for funding partnerships with the state and federal government and the Metropolitan Water District.

I think regulations are always a challenge. Regulations that make sense and protect the public health are good things, but sometimes regulations get a little too complicated and go against the goal that we're trying to achieve.

So I think there are some unknowns out there.

How will the coastal commission deal with desalination? What are some of the regulations that we'll deal with in other water supply development activities?

I think ultimately, what happens in the Bay Delta and what that means for the state water project water that will come to Southern California, that's a process that continues to unfold.

There are clearly obstacles.

I think we've had a lot of success saving a lot of water inside homes and businesses, we've been very successful, the public's really stepped up to the plate. Now we've got to conserve water in the landscape, outdoors, people's yards, common areas, commercial industrial parks, and that's harder. It takes behavioral changes, it takes ongoing maintenance and what we're finding out is it's harder than we thought.

What role could the business community play in helping the San Diego County Water Authority achieve those goals?

I think the business community has really got it on water supply reliability. They've completely understood the relationship between water supply reliability and maintaining the economic vitality and health of the region. I think they've been big supporters of our water transfer; they've been big supporters of diversification - - seawater desalination, water recycling and water conservation.

I think what we need is that continued support, their active engagement and working with the water authority and its member agencies on moving forward on some of these supplies. Whether it's being a customer for recycled water or looking at how they use water in their landscape.

There are certain industries that have always been willing to work with us, and that has been a big support. Especially in water conservation the landscaping industry -- the landscape architects, the contractors. Those people, the building industry, those businesses are key for us to have successful water conservation.

We understand our mission is to supply a reliable water source. But we also need to do it in a cost effective manner, and the water authority understands that. For us it's reliability, but it's also at a cost we can all afford, including business and the residents of the region.

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