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Opinion

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It's all about 'our' water, right?

I'm very concerned about our water. After reading this, I hope you will be, too. Did you notice how I said "our" water? Although I, like around maybe 2,000 of my neighbors in Soquel Creek Water District, have my own private well, it's still all "our" water. Make no mistake about it.

In case you didn't know, excluding the relatively small amount provided to the City of Santa Cruz from the San Lorenzo River, by far the largest proportion of "our" water supply in Santa Cruz County and the entire Monterey Bay Region is water stored in the ground and is supplied to us via someone's well. We don't import water. We are entirely dependent on our finite and irreplaceable underground storage in a number of different basins or aquifers. And, by the way, don't expect that the boundaries of these basins correspond in any consistent or logical way to the boundaries of the above ground agencies that oversee "our" water. They don't.

All my neighbors (including my water district, Soquel Creek Water District) and I have our straws in the same two underground reservoirs, the Purisima and the Aromas Red Sands to the south. Purisima supplies about two-thirds of SCWD's water, with Aromas Red Sands making up the rest. We all just can't see it.

SCWD customers pay for the district's services and overhead in their bills. Whether we receive service or not though, none of us pay anything currently for "our" water, like they now must in Pajaro (PVWMA). It's "free" here. History has shown us again and again how the greatest of civilizations and societies have been toppled from their heights through their foolish inattention to or their arrogant or greed driven miscalculations about their water. I would hope that we could somehow be different here. However, apparently, it looks like we must have a low historian count here in the Monterey Bay Area.

I had been basically a city dweller for all my 21 years when I married and moved to the Santa Cruz Mountains 30 years ago, and I acquired my first well. Iron water. Try it sometime and you'll start getting the idea about what's the norm in third world countries.



Doug Deitch

Guest columnist

When I considered moving to my present home in Aptos five years later, the first thing I did was walk into the kitchen, turn on the faucet, and draw and drink a glass of the finest. I never left.

My family and I have been fortunate enough to enjoy this miraculous blessing that has been freely provided to us except for small electric and equipment costs. We all in this region have been blessed by this wonderful, hidden resource which has been created over eons in geologic time by the filtering flows and storage of this most essential fluid. This abundant natural system could have operated continuously at its original productivity and would have provided our children and us with a sustainable supply for all of our reasonable needs. However, our needs were and are not reasonable. As a result of this, our underground resource, which we all must necessarily and reasonably attempt to share to sustain ourselves, cannot and will not itself be sustained.

The reason for this failure is that our needs now require that agribusiness and farming (which use 80 percent or more of our supply without any control) chronically overdraft our underground storage. The massive overdraft causes approximately an annual and permanent loss of irreplaceable underground storage capacity equal to two Loch Lomonds worth (15,000 acre feet) of water storage. Our needs further require that thousands of acres of orchard be ripped-up to be replaced by water intensive fields and crops using 3 to 4 or more times as much water. These new crops drink hard and deep into coastal aquifers until chloride (salt) levels escalate beyond the crop's tolerance. Once polluted with saltwater, wells are moved inland until they too are also claimed by chloride and made permanently useless by the con-

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tamination. Then other more inland parcels are purchased, new high production wells are punched beckoning the sea further inland yet, and pipeline is placed back to the coastal fields. That's all "our" free water being mined there.

"Free" water must, by definition, cost nothing. However, there are enormous costs. We just haven't started paying them yet. The costs are permanent, irreplaceable, massive, and annually recurring loss to the principal balance of our groundwater bank account. The district has measured salt water in coastal wells. The La Selva Beach test well chloride results exponentially degraded from 80-130 ppm (parts per million) chloride in 1993 to over 2,700 ppm in just four years in 1997. The drinking water limit for chloride is 250 ppm. Chloride in seawater is measured 19,000 ppm. So the decline of the Aromas Red Sands quickens as "our" storage is claimed by the sea.

During the past 20 years, the same Board of Directors of Soquel Creek Water District has silently stood by and passively allowed one-third of its supply in "our" southerly aquifer, shared with Pajaro (PVWMA), to be drained away. This supply has supported unconscionably abusive agricultural overdrafting there. To find solutions, district directors in desperation must now seek new and tenuous measures such as a new well which very possibly threatens the viability of Soquel Creek as a living waterway.

Cabrillo College is also impacted. The college is the largest and, after fire suppression, the most vital and essential user in SCWD's service area. The campus is a few blocks down Soquel Drive from the district's office. However, the college must, apparently, consider drilling a new well on site, due to SCWD's lack of foresight and apparent inability to meet a ser-

vice need projected to be flat for 20 years of only 1 percent of SCWD's annual production. Is there any other 14,000-plus student college, located in an urban corridor and undergoing an \$85 million expansion, located anywhere in this country being provided water service by a well? Certainly not UCSC.

I don't pay anything for my "free" water now. However, I'm ready to start because the solutions will be expensive. As a matter of fact, I even want to start paying at a rate at least twice as much as they are paying in PVWMA, and I'd suggest to all of you that you might want to consider this as well. I guess I knew nothing so good could really be free. The costs are very expensive now but will get only more expensive as we continue on allowing our water to be used in the way we are allowing it to be used. Yes, the costs are large, but they are only being deferred to the future. The piper will be paid and the buck must stop for now at the Boards of SCWD, PVWMA, and our county supervisors.

I just hope we don't have to pay the biggest cost. Because, in the end, I believe the greatest cost for our decades of neglect of our water will be the irretrievable loss of the unique quality of life we enjoy here, which is so much enhanced by the aesthetic and cultural landscape created by our diverse community. This community has been and is substantially grounded in a rural/agricultural base and tradition, which necessarily must be changed and lost once the brutally managed, once abundant ground water resource which once so well sustained it and us is gone forever. I'll miss it.

Douglas Deitch is the executive director of the Monterey Bay Conservancy in Santa Cruz. These views are solely those of Mr. Deitch and not necessarily those of the Register-Pajaronian.

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BY GARRY TRUDEAU