

COACHELLA VALLEY WATER DISTRICT VOTES TO APPROVE GUIDELINES TO ALLOW COLORADO RIVER WATER USE IN A LARGER AREA THAN PREVIOUSLY PERMITTED

The Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) has voted to approve new guidelines to allow water from the Colorado River to be used in a larger area than previously permitted, by a vote of 3-2 on July 12, 2016. By making a larger supply of water available, farmlands can be developed in new areas, including the dry fringes of the eastern Coachella Valley. This new policy reflects a change from CVWD's former position restricting water use. The area is set to receive increasing volumes of water from the Colorado River under a 2003 water transfer deal.

History of the Source of Water to the Coachella Valley

By contract established in 1934, the federal government agreed to build canals and deliver water to CVWD in a 137,000-acre area known as Improvement District No. 1. In 2003, the Imperial Irrigation District (IID) agreed to sell increasing amounts of water to CVWD and the San Diego County Water Authority (SDCWA) in a water transfer deal known as the Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA).

One of the provisions in the QSA permits CVWD to use water outside of Improvement District No. 1 for its groundwater replenishment efforts.

The Coachella Valley has been annually receiving approximately 330,000 acre-feet of water from the Colorado River under the QSA through the Coachella branch of the All-American Canal. Under the QSA, an additional 41,000 acre-feet of water will be received this year, which is anticipated to grow to an additional 103,000 acre-feet by 2026.

Since 2009, CVWD has been using the Mid-Valley Pipeline to bring Colorado River water to Palm Desert, which is outside of Improvement District No. 1. That water is combined with recycled water and used by golf courses and homeowners' associations in order to reduce pumping from wells. Until now, CVWD has only provided Colorado River water outside of Improvement District No. 1 to properties that have wells so that pumping will be reduced. Under the new guidelines, property owners in surrounding areas will be permitted to receive Colorado River water regardless of whether or not they have wells or are pumping groundwater.

Impact of New Guidelines

CVWD's new policy will allow for irrigated farmland in the Coachella Valley to increase by as much as ten percent. This new farmland would boost agriculture in the Valley, which currently produces crops including grapes, dates, carrots and peppers.

Under the new guidelines, landowners can apply to the CVWD Board to receive Colorado River water for ten-year terms. The Board will review the applications and determine which ones should be approved. CVWD's staff estimates that applications for as much as 7,640 additional acres of land could be requested in Oasis, North Shore and other areas in the eastern portion of the Valley. If that occurs, a new distribution system that carries water to about 75,000 acres

will need to be built. The landowners will be responsible for paying the cost of building new pipelines to transport the water.

CVWD Board President John Powell, Jr. said that the purpose of the 2003 water transfer agreement was to ensure that Coachella Valley has sufficient water supplies to prepare for anticipated population growth and to address the problem of groundwater overdraft. Mr. Powell believes that the additional water should only be used to address overdraft conditions, and not to change past water agreements. Over the past several decades, groundwater levels have declined in large portions of the Coachella Valley even though it has been receiving water from the Colorado River.

Conclusion and Implications

CVWD's decision to allow water from the Colorado River to be used in larger areas in the Valley could expand farmland in the desert and increase its agricultural economy. However, some critics are concerned that increased agriculture will bring competition to already established farms. Others are concerned that this new policy could jeopardize the Valley's water rights if other districts object. Some fear that this will result in a "gold rush" effect by encouraging people to farmland that has never been farmed before and put an even greater demand on the limited water supplies from the Colorado River.

Although inflows of water from the Colorado River have helped offset declines in the groundwater levels, water is still a limited resource in the Coachella Valley. The CVWD will have to determine, on a case-by-case basis, whether applications for water from the Colorado River under its newly revised guidelines should be approved. The increased demand for water will have to be weighed against the benefits of increased agriculture in the Valley.

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