**These conversations provide a valuable opportunity to discuss water-related issues and possibilities that will affect the future of our region.**

*—Yolo County Supervisor Mike McGowan*

# ANR Healthy Families and Communities

# *Making a Difference*

## Delta Water Conversations

**Community conversations led by University of California investigators found that San Joaquin–Sacramento Delta residents want their concerns about the future of the Delta fully heard and considered by policymakers. In the conversations, local residents expressed strong interest in conservation and education, and little support for a water bond and Peripheral Canal.**

### *The Issue*

California faces an increasingly bleak water outlook due to overallocation of water rights, increasing environmental concerns, and an expanding population. Public and private entities have proposed a myriad of solutions, many of which will profoundly affect residents living around the San Joaquin–Sacramento Delta. The public should play a strong role in influencing water policy development. Yet many local residents feel alienated by traditional politics and public forums, which they believe are one-sided or occur too late for authentic public contribution. Delta residents are particularly concerned that they have been left out of water management planning processes.

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**The Delta is a special place. It's not a plumbing fixture, it's a place.**

*— Participant*

## Responding to the Issue

University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Advisors sought to hear firsthand what residents are saying about water and to provide them with a voice for policymakers and other local stakeholders. Nonpartisan, public conversations were held using the National Issue Forums (NIF) approach in which participants were asked to discuss, not debate, the advantages and disadvantages of three typical approaches to how people talk about California water. A trained, neutral moderator led the two-hour conversations using the discussion guide *Uncertain Waters: Navigating California's Water Priorities*, produced by California Center for the Book. Neutral note-takers recorded participants' statements.

## The Conversations

UCCE Advisors held 10 conversations; 100 adults participated in nine conversations and 28 high school students took part in one conversation. Conversations took place in libraries in five Delta counties: Contra Costa, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Solano, and Yolo. Conversation notes were analyzed using standard qualitative research methods. Statements were grouped into themes that emerged in the conversations. The findings presented are the words of the participants.

## Implications

Many participants expressed deep skepticism that policymakers would listen to their views. This project demonstrated that policymakers and stakeholders need to employ new and more productive ways to work with the public on natural resource issues. The conversations clearly showed that there is a need for:

- More community conversations in which participants have opportunities to share knowledge, views and values about water. In exit evaluations completed by 74 participants, 100% strongly agreed or agreed that they had enough opportunities to talk, and 87% strongly agreed or agreed that the conversations allowed them to fully voice their ideas about water.
- More local voice and/or control over water policy decisions.
- Public education about water, including use, reuse, and conservation.

## The Findings

### The Problem with Water

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current water allocation process and proposals to resolve water issues. Some of the many concerns expressed by participants included:

- "We have over-encumbered our water. We have oversold our water…we don't have to sell, but we keep selling it."
- "No one should be able to sell water for a profit…it should not belong to anyone."
- "Science can't tell you what should be done in terms of policy. Science can tell us if we can save the Delta smelt…it can't tell us if we should."
- "We need to quit building towns that have no water. Building in deserts is stupid."

### Lack of Local Perspective

Residents demonstrated a high level of knowledge about the Delta, especially its unique ecosystem. They expressed dissatisfaction with previous town hall meetings and forums that did not let them contribute their perspectives and knowledge:

- "Usually they come here and ask but really, they have already decided. No wonder we are so mad!"
- "The California Delta is a magical place. If we were talking about Lake Tahoe, people would not stand for it being pumped dry."
- "We need to recognize that the environment is our best friend. We are the stewards of the Delta. We have never had a chance to tell how to solve a problem."
- "The farther away you get from local knowledge the worse the decisions are."

### The Role of Money and Politics

A thread through many of the conversations was that power and money are key drivers to political decisions about water policy:

- "Water is only treated as a commodity to be controlled, not as a habitat."
- "Decisions are not made on science, always on politics."
- "We need to enforce what [policies] we have now…we're being steamrolled."
- "We can't reach consensus…going to be eternal conflict because water is life."
- "Money and power will always drive water policy."
- [regarding Peripheral Canal] "South has power. It's a political issue. I don't know how we can get out of it."

**In Mediterranean countries people use much less water. We brought our traditions from the East Coast. Standards for conservation need to reflect the environment.**

*—Participant*

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## Acknowledgments

This project was delivered by the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR) in partnership with these nonpartisan, nonprofit collaborators: California Center for the Book; Water Education Foundation; California National Issues Forum Network; California State Library; and local libraries in Elk Grove, Martinez, Moraga, Oakley, San Ramon, Stockton, Suisun City, Walnut Grove, and West Sacramento. We greatly appreciate the tremendous support of branch librarians who provided meeting space, room setup, event promotion, and refreshments.

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### Funding

Funding for the video *Voices from the Delta: Conversations about California's Water* was provided by the Renewable Resources Extension Act.

The discussion guides *Uncertain Waters: Navigating California's Water Priorities* were provided by the California Center for the Book. *http://www.calbook.org/special/water/water_issues_guide.pdf/.*




The illustration on page one is courtesy of the *Integration and Application Network* (*ian.umces.edu/symbols/*).


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### Need for Education

Participants at every conversation stated that more education about water conservation, efficiency, and reuse is critical:

- "Education is the key, for personal choices and for public policy. Too many people are unaware."
- "We are not intentionally wasting water. We just don't know about the issue, and we are not teaching about it."
- "People need to know that water is a finite resource."

### The Water Bond

The Safe, Clean, and Reliable Drinking Water Supply Act of 2012, known as the water bond, elicited much discussion and a general lack of support. Many participants indicated relief that the bond was removed from the 2010 ballot, whereas others felt it should have been left on so it could be immediately defeated. Many noted that more time is needed to discuss issues before water policies are considered for a vote:

- "Ballot measure is ahead of where we are…we need more discussion to agree on values."
- "We have already seen bad faith from other Delta bonds that were supposed to go into levees. I think they are banking it for the Peripheral Canal."

### Conservation and Innovation

Many participants offered suggestions, often being used successfully elsewhere, that incorporate technology and/or innovation:

- "My pal in Missouri has a cistern. I can't understand what we are doing in California."
- "We can conserve water through low-impact design to prevent urban runoff…lots of work has been done on that in Portland."
- "We need an index for food: gallons per serving. Maybe if we put an index on food that shares gallons per serving including washing of dishes."
- "The cost of the Peripheral Canal is up to $50 million…desalinization could add a lot of water for $50 million."

### Need for Better Policy

Participants offered suggestions for improving water allocation and policy:

- "Regional self-sufficiency is needed, and a correlation between where water is used and who pays the cost. Now it seems we transfer the costs to others."
- "We need to question growth in relation to water availability. California cannot sustain the population projected. We don't have a water use problem; we have a population problem."
- "We don't pay enough for water. Some places don't even have water meters yet, and groundwater isn't monitored at all."
- "Policies should be regionally specific…drip irrigation doesn't work for some soils and crops, and it can cost $1000 an acre. Some farmers can't afford this."