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FEATURED

NYWD: No 2022 irrigation season

By Robert Summa rsumma@appealdemocrat.com Apr 15, 2022 Updated 13 hrs ago



Water is seen flowing March 14 from a water tank that serves the community of Challenge.

Robert Summa/Appeal-Democrat

Because of a lack of “capacity” to deliver water and ongoing drought conditions, North Yuba Water District General Manager Jeff Maupin announced Thursday that there will not be a 2022 irrigation season for customers.

In a previous report about North Yuba Water District (NYWD), Maupin said water issues that currently exist with NYWD are not a water supply problem, but a water conveyance problem.

Maupin highlighted this issue in his announcement Thursday to irrigation customers in the district.

“Even though we’ve had a few storms recently, we do not have the capacity or the means to deliver an irrigation season to irrigation customers during this drought year,” Maupin said.

In the announcement, Maupin listed several reasons as to why this action had to be taken. They include:

- In order to have an irrigation season we must have water available to divert both from the Forbestown Ditch and from Mother Nature through Dry Creek for a combined total of 12 CFS (cubic feet per second). Due to the drought, we do not have this.
- NYWD’s main conveyance system is the Forbestown Ditch, which can presently hold a maximum of 24 CFS. It is an open ditch and loses an average of 35 percent of its water along the 10 miles, due to seepage.
- In 2005, the NYWD Board of Directors signed a new contract that took effect in 2010, dramatically changing how the 24 CFS is allotted in the Forbestown Ditch. Because of this and the ongoing drought, since 2012, irrigation seasons have been extremely inconsistent.
- Prior to 2010, South Feather Water and Power (SFWPA) was contractually owed 11 CFS at the head of the Forbestown Ditch and they were responsible for the seepage and water lost along the way. This arrangement left about 4 CFS (out of 24 CFS) that NYWD diverted for irrigation purposes. When Mother Nature was good, it combined with water from Dry Creek to provide the needed 12 CFS to produce a full irrigation season most years.
- After 2010, under the new agreement, NYWD now owes SFWPA 11 CFS at the bottom of the Ditch and NYWD is accountable for all the water loss along the way, leaving virtually no water to divert from the Forbestown Ditch for irrigation purposes. Even with SFWPA’s recent offer to reduce demand by 2.0-4.0 CFS at the bottom of the Ditch, there is not sufficient additional Mother Nature water through Dry Creek to initiate an irrigation season.

To help with the conveyance issue that Maupin felt is preventing delivery of water in an effective manner, the installation of a pipe has been proposed for the open Forbestown Ditch.

“We must work to pipe the Forbestown Ditch so we can regain the 35% of our water lost to seepage and take advantage of the additional capacity provided by the proposed 42-inch pipe,” Maupin said in his announcement Thursday. “Engineering is complete on the project, but ongoing lawsuits by South Feather Water & Power Authority and a few seasonal agriculture customers, have stalled the project. The NYWD Board and the NYWD staff remain unanimously supportive of piping the Forbestown Ditch and need your support in the coming years to accomplish this goal.”

Maupin said that if a pipe is not installed in Forbestown Ditch, then “the only potential for an irrigation season in future years will be in extremely wet years, when Mother Nature allows.”

Critics respond

News that there will not be a 2022 irrigation season for NYWD customers was met with fierce criticism Friday from some who have said that Maupin and the district have continued to mismanage water deliveries.

Upon receiving the news, Oregon House resident Marieke Furnee sent a letter to Yuba County District Five Supervisor Randy Fletcher about her concerns and continued fears of how the district is being run.

“I remember speaking to you (Fletcher) about this earlier, expressing my fear that such a thing could happen and you tried to instill trust in me, saying that you trusted that the Directors would make the best possible decision,” Furnee said in her letter. “It turns out that the Directors did not make any decision at all, this cancellation was not decided in a meeting. According to the newly adopted irrigation policy, the GM can cancel the season at will, without any input from anyone.”

Dr. Gretchen Flohr, a former director of the NYWD board who was elected to the Division Four seat in 2019, said Maupin’s explanations for the decision made by the district didn’t add up.

In Maupin’s claim about water from Dry Creek, Flohr challenged that assertion.

“Dry Creek water was only ever intended to supplement the allotted water which is stored in Little Grass Valley. We do not need water from Dry Creek – we need our water from Little Grass Valley. SFWPA informed us that the reservoir at Little Grass Valley is full and they anticipate a full irrigation delivery season. NYWD shares this reservoir with SFWPA,” Flohr said in an email. “We do not need 12 CFS to deliver irrigation water. Examination of the water use records shows that with as little as 7 CFS, irrigation water was delivered in the past very reliably.”

Flohr said SFWPA has offered to repair the conveyance system in Forbestown Ditch and increase its capacity.

“NYWD ignored their offer which was to do this repair at cost. Further, SFWPA offered to do maintenance of the next three years (this would have been year two) and ultimately increase the capacity to a maximum of 50 CFS with a seepage loss of 10%. NYWD completely ignored SFWPA’s offer, choosing instead to refuse water to its customers,” Flohr said.

She claimed that since Maupin was hired as general manager of NYWD, he has not wanted to provide irrigation water to customers.

“Jeff Maupin and his refusal to conduct regular annual maintenance of NYWD conveyances, his inexplicable vendetta against irrigation customers, and a Board that does Maupin’s every bidding are the reasons for the extremely inconsistent delivery of irrigation water,” Flohr claimed.

She said prior to the 2005 contract, “NYWD’s revenues were approximately \$500,000 per year.”

She said NYWD’s current salaries and benefits for a seven-person staff are costing the district nearly \$1 million.

“NYWD water runs through the SFWPA infrastructure, and for that NYWD receives millions in revenues. NYWD does nothing. SFWPA performs all the maintenance on the infrastructure (except the Forbestown Ditch which is supposed to be maintained by NYWD and is not),” Flohr said.

With regards to the controversial plan to install a pipe in Forbestown Ditch, Flohr claimed it’s something the community has said they do not want.

“A \$15-20 million dollar pipe is unwarranted and unwanted. This community does not want a plastic, largely above-ground plastic pipe that will only ever convey 24 CFS or 7,420 acre feet of water,” Flohr said. “NYWD is entitled to 23,700 acre feet. The pipe NYWD directed to be designed will never hold more than 7,420 acre feet of water (3,700 for NYWD and 3,720 for SFWPA). ... Plastic pipes will burn or melt in fire, further reviewing NYWD’s extremely incompetent work on the irrigation canal where their plastic pipe was leaking at all joints and floating in the water leaking out the first season it was in place,

and the same level of incompetence shown at the Oroleve Ditch demonstrates that NYWD is not capable of maintaining or managing the ditches, let alone installing a pipe.”

Flohr claimed the statement presented by Maupin on Thursday is nothing more than a “form of blackmail” to the NYWD community.

Alton Wright, a Forbestown resident who lost to Fletcher in the 2018 District Five supervisor race and is a possible write-in candidate for the upcoming June 7 election, said the decision by Maupin and NYWD affects not only irrigation customers, but the people who call the foothills home.

“The current cancellation of NYWD irrigation, a problematic, recurring decision by Manager Maupin and his Board, affects far more than the farming and ranching customers of Oregon House/Dobbins. It impacts the safety and pocketbooks of all Foothill and Yuba County residents and taxpayers,” Wright said in an email. “The availability of ample, free-flowing, unrestricted water, from canals and the Forbestown Ditch, is used to fight wildfires. The water fills lakes and ponds that proved critical to fight past fires. Surface water recharges aquifers, increases property values and creates green belts that lure visitors to our area. And, we all know that a fire in one part of our County impacts us all. Scared visitors who stay away and decreasing property values each reduce Yuba County’s coffers.”

Wright also shared his concerns with the Forbestown Ditch pipe plan.

“Instead of working to make our area safer, greener, more attractive and more prosperous, Manager Maupin and his Board want to spend millions for an undersized, venerable, plastic pipe. Stubbornly, they believe that without it, NYWD can’t serve irrigation,” Wright said. “This decision is grossly negligent of a far less expensive, better and quicker solution – South Feather Water & Power Agency, a partner on the Forbestown Ditch, put forward two plans that will solve everything. First, they’ve offered, for only \$250K and in approximately a month, to dig out and to improve problematic issues on the 10-mile Ditch. Doing so will increase water flows to historic highs.

“They’ve also generously offered to reduce their seasonal draw and forgive all incurred water losses. There’s absolutely no reason for NYWD to not deliver irrigation with juicy offers like this that save taxpayers millions and keep us all safe.”

If managed properly, Wright said the issues raised by NYWD and Maupin would subside.

“Also, if NYWD accepted these offers, not only would there be more than ample water, expensive lawsuits currently zapping NYWD’s operating capital would likely all go away,” Wright said. “There are power players and influencers – The Yuba Water Agency and Yuba County BoS – that should provide leadership in this situation. Instead, there’s no passion or vision to help resolve this crisis once and for all. There also might be nefarious puppeteers and back room land development deals, both local and out of area, seeding the obvious absence of leadership. Whatever the case, the crisis needs attention now. Fires and dwindling aquifers won’t wait. Livelihoods are ending. Hard-working taxpayers and ratepayers are exhausted and their pocketbooks thin. NYWD, please stop the waste, do the right thing, and accept SFWPA’s offers now.”

Maupin did not respond as of press time when asked to comment on this story.