

# Rivers ignore boundaries

Santa Clara conflict requires regional cooperation

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Many of the public-policy challenges that matter most, such as safeguarding air and water quality, disregard boundaries drawn for political purposes. Resolving conflict over such issues requires broadly regional cooperation, yet this is often stymied by the jealous defense of bureaucratic turf and political ego that such arbitrary boundaries encourage.

Southern California is witnessing such a conflict, which boiled over last week in Simi Valley during a meeting of the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board. As is so often the case in the semi-arid West, the locus of this confrontation is a river, the pre-eminent mechanism by which nature reveals the artificiality of political distinctions.

The Santa Clara River runs about 100 miles from its headwaters in the San Gabriel Mountains near Acton to the Pacific Ocean in Ventura. Farmers in Ventura County use the river for irrigation, some diverting water from surface flows and others pumping from wells that have been replenished by seepage from the river into the aquifer below.

There's a lot more water in the river than there used to be; many stretches, historically dry much of the year, now have perennial flows. The reason is not climate change but urbanization in Los Angeles County. The sewage from more than 52,000 houses and other dwellings in the Santa Clarita Valley is sent to the Saugus and Valencia treatment plants, which discharge 17 million gallons of wastewater a day into the Santa Clara River.

That would seem good news for downstream irrigators: 52 acre-feet of free water a day, 19,000 acre-feet a year, much of it originally delivered to the Santa Clarita Valley by the State Water Project. Users typically pay around \$400 an acre-foot for state water, meaning the highly treated wastewater released into the river each year has a value of nearly \$8 million.

But along with the water, the Saugus and Valencia plants send more than 20,000 pounds of salt down the river each day. Most is produced by residential water softeners, which dump brine into the sewer system each time they recharge.

At high enough concentrations, salt kills plants. At lower concentrations, it can render them more susceptible to disease and reduce crop yield. Three of the major commercial crops grown in the Santa Clara River valley downstream from the sewage plants — avocados, strawberries and nursery stock — are particularly vulnerable.

In recognition of this, the Regional Water Quality Control Board adopted a rule, which took effect in May, calling for chloride concentrations in the river to remain below the level believed to cause crop damage. But it gave the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County, which operates the facilities, 13 years to meet that standard. In the interim, while more studies are conducted, they may discharge twice that much salt.

There are several opportunities during that 13-year timetable to revisit the issue if new data warrant it. At last week's meeting, Ventura County growers and water

managers presented compelling evidence that the board should do so. A recent research review confirmed that the lower salt limit is justified if plant damage is to be averted, and the United Water Conservation District released well-monitoring data indicating the salty river is contaminating the underground supply for thousands of urban and agricultural users in Ventura County.

The sanitation agency argues against tougher limits, saying it will be too costly. The only effective way to remove chloride from wastewater is to build a reverse-osmosis plant, which the agency estimates would cost \$422 million and boost annual sewer fees from \$112 to \$520 per household. The districts prefer to delay action until residential water softeners, prohibited in new construction, are phased out in older homes.

That's an elusive goal at best, and it's hard to feel much sympathy for the folks in the Santa Clarita Valley, who apparently pay only as third as much for sewer service as residents of Ventura and other coastal communities. It also is unclear why their financial interests should trump those of Ventura County growers.

Beside this dubious ethical calculus, the sanitation agency's attitude reveals laziness in confronting a challenge that has spurred other communities — Orange County, for one — to become creative. The semi-desert Santa Clarita Valley is throwing away nearly \$8 million worth of fresh water each year. A reverse-osmosis plant, designed and operated in cooperation with other water users in the thirsty region, could recapture a significant amount of that for resale, offsetting the plant's cost.

The regional board has the power to encourage such creativity and cooperation while also protecting Ventura County farmers. It should not squander such an opportunity.