

## **MONTECITO WATER DISTRICT TIGHTENS THE VALVE**

### **“If The Grass Is Greener On The Other Side Of The Fence, You Can Bet The Water Bill Is Higher” – Anonymous**

#### **SUMMARY**

The 2014-15 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) received an inquiry concerning Montecito Water District’s implementation of Ordinances 92 and 93. These ordinances deal with allocating water during the water shortage emergency, including penalties and restrictions. The contention was made that the actual application of Montecito Water District’s rates was different from what was presented during the approval process.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Most Californians receive their water through the city in which they reside. Those who live in unincorporated areas receive water through state regulated water districts, governed by elected board members. The Montecito Water District (MWD) includes the unincorporated communities of Montecito and Summerland, with a total population of 13,100, providing water to approximately 4,500 customers. MWD encompasses an area of 9,888 acres, 6,883 of which are developed. Of the developed area, 98 percent is residential and 2 percent commercial. MWD also serves 849 acres which are designated agricultural.<sup>1</sup>

The Montecito Water District has four sources of water:

- Lake Cachuma Project Water - 39%
- Jameson Lake, Fox and Alder Creeks - 21%
- Doulton Tunnel and groundwater basin - 9%
- State Water Project - 31%

California is entering its fourth year of drought, forcing the state, some cities, and water districts to take actions to reduce water usage. Within Santa Barbara County, MWD has taken the most aggressive action.<sup>2</sup>

The MWD, acting under the authority of *State Water Code section 350*, implemented two ordinances (Ordinance 92 on February 11, 2014 and Ordinance 93 on February 21, 2014), declaring a water emergency and placing restrictions on water usage with the goal of a 30

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.montecitowater.com/general.htm](http://www.montecitowater.com/general.htm) (last visited September 26, 2014)

<sup>2</sup> [www.sbwater.org/interior.aspx?id](http://www.sbwater.org/interior.aspx?id) (last visited October 26, 2014)

## **MONTECITO WATER DISTRICT TIGHTENS THE VALVE**

percent reduction. Ordinance 92 deals with restrictions on water usage. Ordinance 93 establishes water allocations for residential, commercial and agricultural customers.

The concern was raised that the allocation for agricultural accounts was inequitable. The contention was that, under the new regulations, properties with both residential and agricultural use were not getting any water for residential, yet were being charged for it.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The Jury reviewed MWD Ordinances 92 and 93, interviewed the MWD's management and customers, and examined customers' water bills. The Jury learned that prior to the adoption of the ordinances there were multiple public meetings and presentations for stakeholder review.

The Jury studied two customer groups: residential and agricultural. Residential users are charged according to the amount of water used, with the unit cost increasing as water use increases. If a customer surpasses their initial tier limit, they will be placed in the next tier, and charged incrementally at a higher rate. Agricultural users with residential dwellings are charged the residential rate for the first 20 hundred-cubic-feet used per dwelling. For these users, water consumption above the initial 20 hundred-cubic-feet per dwelling is charged at an agricultural rate. Prior to May 2014 MWD water bills did not distinguish between residential and agricultural usage. The new bill differentiates residential from agricultural usage.

### **CONCLUSION**

The 2014-15 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) finds that the allegations were incorrect. The Jury believes the confusion arose because of the way water charges were presented on the customers' bills. This problem was alleviated by a modified, improved bill that the District now uses, which differentiates residential and agricultural charges.

During a prolonged drought we are reminded of how precious a reliable water supply is to our way of life. The Jury commends community members who get involved with community actions that are proposed by our elected officials, such as the enactment of Ordinances 92 and 93 by the Montecito Water District.

Under *California Penal Code Section 933.05* this report does not require a response.