

The 2015 – 2016 Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury
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For more information contact:
Maria Millsaps, Grand Jury Foreperson
[805.568.2291](tel:805.568.2291)

News Release

Lake Cachuma – Protecting a Valuable Resource You Can't Drink Paper Water

The 2015 – 2016 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) investigated the way in which water is allocated from the Cachuma Project. Lake Cachuma has provided up to 85% of the water needs for approximately 340,000 acres of agriculture and 250,000 residents. Its water supply has been allocated with the goal of lasting over a six to seven-year drought cycle. However, the Jury found that the water from Lake Cachuma was over allocated because only four years into a drought cycle, the lake was virtually dry. This reality indicates that the contract governing the Cachuma Project is outdated and that the maximum supply of water on paper is not the actual supply available.

This report discusses, among other concerns, the issues that need to be considered during the next contract renewal process to be completed by 2020. Annual safe yield must be recalculated based on the actual water available. The recalculation must take into account lower reservoir capacity due to siltation, demands for downstream water rights, and federal requirements to maintain fish habitat that did not exist when the current contract was first approved. The new contract should require frequent reviews to address changing water needs and must evaluate a new operating mode whereby water is distributed at an annual rate that maximizes the efficient use of Lake Cachuma. Changes to the operational mode have the potential to save millions of dollars in extra costs to the South Coast.

Finally, approvals of water for new developments must be based on the amount of water available during the worst case scenario of a prolonged drought and NOT on the water available during a “normal” water year as is done currently.

The Jury's report, titled “Lake Cachuma – Protecting a Valuable Resource, You Can't Drink Paper Water,” can be found on its website at www.sbcgj.org.

The Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury is a basic part of government within the judicial branch. The Grand Jury acts independently, yet is under the general control of the Superior Court Presiding Judge to assure that it acts in accordance with the Penal Code of the State of California.

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