

Guest Columnist: Matt LaVere, Mayor, City of San Buenaventura

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## **A Collaborative Path Forward to Protect our Most Precious Water Resource**

The future of the Ventura River Watershed is in our hands.

A vital water resource, the watershed serves many diverse interests in the region including agricultural users, businesses, individuals, water districts and cities that depend on it each day. Right now, this essential water supply is at risk, consistently being stretched to capacity as a result of changing climate conditions and prolonged periods of drought. It's a serious challenge that requires timely action. That's why the city is committed to establishing a balanced solution that protects this precious water resource now and moving forward.

Collaboration — with the watershed's interests — is key to creating this effective solution. To adequately address the challenges facing our water supply, we must take into consideration each and every water user's needs who currently divert and pump water from it. By collaborating with all local stakeholders, we can develop a holistic, locally driven approach to secure the Ventura River Watershed.

The ongoing litigation initially started with Santa Barbara Channelkeeper suing the city over its use of the Ventura River, even though there are many users in the watershed. The California Court of Appeal agreed with the city in a ruling last year that it could bring in other users given that Channelkeeper's claims could impact the city's long-held rights to Ventura River water. The city made the difficult decision to bring in all water users in order to protect its water rights and to ensure that everyone is part of the solution.

Over the next few weeks, all owners of any real property that overlies the watershed's four groundwater basins, as well as users who take or could take water from the Ventura River, will receive a notification or summons about the court proceedings as part of an ongoing legal process and as required by the court. We understand the initial confusion and frustration that may be felt by those receiving this notice or summons. That's why I want to assure you that this is a necessary legal step and we are committed to working together to develop a comprehensive solution with all who decide to participate.

If we want to secure our water supply now and for future generations, we need to establish a solution that determines the appropriate use of groundwater and surface water for users' needs and the environment, makes the most of the watershed's limited resources through watershed-level planning, and shares the responsibility of preserving finite water supplies amongst all users.

We are well underway in determining this framework for the future. The city has already begun working with many of our region's largest agricultural and municipal water users, and we are all in agreement that we need a new approach to managing the Ventura

River Watershed. We have also made great progress in this process, including reaching an interim settlement with Santa Barbara Channelkeeper in the original lawsuit regarding the pumping and diverting of water from the Ventura River. These are important steps, but an ultimate solution cannot be achieved by working with one party at a time.

That is why, as we move forward, the city is inviting the region's smaller water users to learn more about the process. Ventura Water's "Protecting Local Water Resources" web page has been updated to provide further information. In addition, three public meetings will be held for impacted property owners with any unanswered questions.

We want to be clear — our desired outcome will not have any "winners" or "losers," but rather a shared commitment by everyone to shoulder the responsibility of safeguarding this precious resource for future generations. It is our collective responsibility to protect the Ventura River Watershed that we all rely on. If we work together, we can develop a path forward that reflects our local water needs and works for everyone.

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