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## California's Parched, But Not Around Here?

*By Sophie Braccini*

It may come as no surprise that one of the most controversial and heated debates going in California right now has to do with the future of our precious water supplies.

Recognizing the importance of water to our future, the Commonwealth Club invited a panel of Bay Area water experts to present their views on the future of water in California at their June 25th meeting in Lafayette's Veterans Hall. The panelists were challenged by a member of the Board of Directors of the East Bay Utility District (EBMUD) who attended the event.

The panel was composed of Gregory Gartell, Assistant General Manager for the Contra Costa Water District; Richard Howitt, Chair and Professor of UC Davis's Agriculture and Resource Economics Department; and Mark Schlosberg, the California Director of Food and Water Watch.

In attendance at the meeting was John Coleman, who represents a number of communities, including Lafayette, on EBMUD's Board of Directors. Coleman was very critical of the panelists. "They are not engineers, and their contributions were disconnected from every day reality."

All the panelists agreed that climate change will significantly affect California's water supply, and these impacts will need to be incorporated into the water agencies' long term modeling. They did not, however, agree on the solution.

Reacting to the panel discussion, Coleman focused on the need for water conservation and for improving the efficiency of water management systems. "Conservation is a great strategy, but we are caught in a conundrum because our fixed costs are the larger part of our expenditure and if people conserve too much, the agency loses money." Coleman added that there is a delicate balance to find between protecting the environment and managing economic reality.

The panel unanimously agreed that desalinization plants are not an effective option for ending our water supply problems. "Too expensive and too costly in term of energy," said Gartrell. "We wouldn't know what to do with the by-products," added Schlosberg.

Once again, Coleman disagreed. "EBMUD has a desalinization project in the pipeline," he said, "it is a joint project with three other local water agencies that is now in phase two and, if all goes according to plan, this project will help meet our future operational needs."

There was some debate among panelists over the idea of privatizing the water supply to increase operational and management efficiency. "Water is not a commodity like gas," argued Schlosberg, "it is essential to life and should not be left in the hands of people who want to turn a profit with it. Water, like air, belongs to us all."

Coleman agreed that complete privatization of water is not a solution, but said that in difficult economic situations private investments and public/private partnerships should be encouraged. "Stockton's privatization was a huge mistake and ended up costing more to users," he said, "but like all public agencies, our financial situation is tough, and we are working on public/private partnerships to finance capital projects."

At the end of the presentation, panelists were asked what they believe to be the most important things to do in the future.

Gartrell favors conservation; he believes that's the most efficient and cost effective thing that can be done right now.

Howitt wants to see the Delta fixed, habitat restored and prices increased to favor conservation among water customers.

Schlosberg thinks attention needs to be given to our aging infrastructure with more emphasis on promoting conservation. For him the single more important thing that people can do is to stop drinking bottled water and drink tap water, "private companies are trying to take over municipal water agencies," he said, "and that's a real long term threat."

For his part, Coleman is confident that EBMUD is doing a good job of planning for the future. "If other agencies are declaring drought now when we are getting out of it, it is because we went into voluntary rationing when others didn't," he said, "the State refused to send a warning signal and those who didn't previously plan are suffering now."

Reach the reporter at: [sophie@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:sophie@lamorindaweekly.com)

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