

Northern California Water Issues
Leagues of Women Voters Benicia



Background

Benicia, California, located on the Carquinez Strait, is at the mouth of the San Francisco Bay Delta Estuary which includes over 1000 miles of waterways, shipping channels, and ecologically sensitive wetlands. It is the drainage basin for the two largest rivers in the state and their tributaries. It provides water for over 26 million people and thousands of acres of irrigated farmland.

General Concerns: Finding Enough Water for All

There are multiple sources of water in our drought-ridden state. We rely on rainwater which varies from 2 inches or less a year in the south to 20 inches annually in the northern mountains. Most rain occurs in the winter and spring months, leaving residents to rely on melting snowpack, water storage facilities, and ground water during the hottest times of the year. During the recent five-year drought, Benicia residents were asked to reduce our water usage by 25%. Drought resistant plants replaced lawns; buckets appeared in showers to collect used water; citizens formed water patrols to remind residents and businesses not to water in the heat of the day. We were successful, reaching a 33% reduction, but in August of the last drought year we didn't receive our full allotment from our primary water source, and had to buy water from a distant water district: \$900,000 for three months' worth of water for 28,000 people. With the demand for water throughout the state exceeding the supply during drought years, power struggles over water can be intense and emotions over water allocations and deliveries run high.

Current Regional Issues: The Fight for Delta Water

For the last decade, water agencies and state departments have been developing a twin tunnel project that would shunt water 35 miles around the Delta, directly from the upstream Sacramento River to the pumping stations and aqueducts that bring needed water to thirsty Southern California. Named the California Water Fix, this proposed water conveyance system would reduce freshwater flows through the Delta and increase saltwater intrusion in the region negatively impacting city water sources, farming, and recreational and commercial fishing, as well as the sensitive Delta ecology. The proposed project is projected to cost 14 billion dollars. No funding mechanism was written in the original plan. Currently funding is being sought from water districts and agencies who will pass the building and operation costs through to their water users via rate hikes.

Current local issues: Water is Expensive

Our city and others around us are having a more difficult time providing enough safe, clean water to our residents. The primary source of water for Benicia is from the Delta, in a slough that is affected by salt water tides. When less freshwater flows through the Delta because of drought, increased upstream use or storage, our source becomes too salty to use. At certain times of the year we must abandon that source and pay for another. The City has upgraded our water treatment and sewage treatment facilities, and installed more efficient water meters all of which have caused our water bills to almost double. Many of our residents are on a fixed income and can't afford these startlingly large increases.

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LWV California League Involvement: Supporting conservation and the environment; Stop the tunnels

The LWV California “supports measures that promote the management and development of water resources in ways that are beneficial to the environment with emphasis on conservation and high standards of water quality.” Our State League has lobbied for dozens of state water bills since 2014, which involve water conservation, water availability, and quality. In our June primary election, the State League supported and helped pass a bond issue that included money for water conservation, water for disadvantaged communities and flood control. A primary concern for the League is that commissions made of political appointees have control over water storage projects and water allotments from them. The LWV opposes the California Water Fix and successfully lobbied to have proposed funding for the twin tunnels removed from the final draft of an \$11 billion water bond in the 2014 election.

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LWV Benicia Involvement: Water Issues Education

Since 2014, members of the LWV Benicia have been researching information, attending hearings, and offering public information sessions on the Delta and Water Fix plan. Over the last four years, we have hosted six different panel discussions and a voter’s forum. The well-attended meetings allowed attendees to learn basic facts about water sources as well as the pros and cons of the Water Fix. One event even included an all-day field trip to a park in the Delta where a ranger explained the intricacies of Delta ecology. Our annual water forum this year was titled “Water Rising”. It featured professional experts on local effects of climate change and sea level rise, the decline in water allocations to our city, and an explanation of the rising cost of water by our mayor. Attendees packed the room, many of them with their water bills in hand.

Partner Organizations: Sources of support and information

We partnered with the City of Benicia, Benicia Public Library, and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) to sponsor venues for our informational meetings. For speakers and information we turned to Restore the Delta, the State Department of Water Resources, University of California Davis, Solano Land Trust, Solano County Water Agency, LWV Bay Area, Delta Planning Commission, Suisun Marsh Conservation District, NASA, National Estuarine Research Reserve, and the Friends of the San Francisco Bay Delta Estuary.

Actions and Impacts: Educate and motivate

Our local League has educated hundreds of residents about the California Water Fix, as well as the sources, the cost, and the quality of our city’s water. After attending our sessions, people became motivated to learn more about water issues and be more politically active in this arena.

What needs doing, next steps: Investigate and inform

The logical next step would be for the LWV Benicia to do a study on the regional effects of the California Water Fix, so we could then take action. However, this is difficult to do, not only because of limited human resources of our small chapter, but also because the Water Fix appears to be an ever-changing plan that is as fluid as the water it seeks to control. We will continue to inform our members and public about changes in it and other water issues as they arise. We will be examining a November 2018 ballot measure, the Water Supply and Water Quality Act of 2018 in a public forum this fall.

For More information on California Water

www.lwvc.org
www.bayareamonitor.org
www.Mavensnotebook.com
www.californiawaterfix
www.restorethedelta.org

Water and Power: A California Heist (Documentary by National Geographic available on Netflix)

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