

A sustainable water supply

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By Ed Mainland

Jim Fryer, former water conservation manager of Marin Municipal Water District, has seriously dented the district's major assumptions about the need for desalination to supplement water conservation.

At his presentation to MMWD's board June 24, most board members accorded Fryer's facts a respectful hearing but gave no sign that MMWD would reconsider its controversial push for a costly new desalination plant on San Rafael's bay front.

Fryer's study "Sustaining Our Water Future" (www.foodandwaterwatch.org/water/desalination) questions whether desal is needed once robust conservation measures are implemented. And based on MMWD's own figures, Fryer estimates desal's cost to be \$399 million contrasted with conservation's \$45 million for the same amount of water.

Ratepayer activists are now calling for the board to hold another session with Fryer to examine whether he or MMWD's manager, Paul Helliker, is closer to the truth.

Helliker claimed on June 24 that even if all Fryer's conservation recommendations are put into effect, there will still be a significant water-supply "deficit".

Activists take particular issue with several MMWD board members - President Alex Foreman and director David Behar - who, they say, play the fear card, rhetorically asking whether Marinites would prefer having desal or their faucets run dry.

National climate researchers predict slightly more rain on average for

Marin under conditions of global warming, including more torrential downpours and more summer rains. Activists anticipate that MMWD staff will seek a paid consultant to contest these predictions and give credence to the frightful images of Behar and Foreman.

The next opportunity for the public to put these numbers to the test will be MMWD's "Water Conservation Summit" on Wednesday, from 8 a.m. to noon, at Embassy Suites Hotel in San Rafael. E-mail MMWD's Dan Carney for registration details at dcarney@marinwater.org.

Activists view Richard Rubin's June 14 Marin Voice column assaulting Fryer's recommendations as more asymmetrical warfare inspired by MMWD against its critics and skeptics.

Rubin failed to mention that Fryer is clearly "local" - a former MMWD conservation expert who has spent most of his adult life in the MMWD service district - even though his study's sponsor is national.

Rubin claimed Fryer proposes "conservation-only" solutions, but in fact, half of Fryer's recommendations would increase the supply, including increased recycling, better reservoir operation and reduced leakage.

Fryer compared Marin's high system leakage unfavorably with San Luis Obispo's success in reducing leakage to near zero.

Rubin decried what he calls Fryer's "radical solutions," "disinformation, misconceptions and inadequate cost/benefit analysis." But there are no "radical" solutions in Fryer's report - all the steps he recommends are well-studied by MMWD and other California water agencies.

Rubin called widespread public opposition "questionable," yet numerous public opinion polls by MMWD consistently show more public support for increased conservation rather than either more Russian River water or desalination.

Rubin claimed there is "no evidence" that conservation can be sufficient during prolonged droughts, while Fryer's report provides abundant evidence that it can.

While Rubin dismissed Fryer's report as having only "conversation value," this "conversation" would have real value if MMWD would listen to Fryer's cost estimates and water deficit numbers.

This would serve the public interest and improve odds for a Marin popular consensus.

MMWD's own chief engineer said two years ago that if Marin could cut its water consumption by 30 percent, a desal plant wouldn't be needed.

Whether conservation and efficiency can meet this target is what the debate is about.#

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