

The Decision That Saved Mono Lake

Celebrating the Tenth Anniversary of the State Water Resources Control Board Order

By Geoffrey McQuilkin

Mono Lake, once imperiled by the excessive diversions of water to Los Angeles, celebrates 10 years of being saved this year.

It was a simple vote that took place on September 28, 1994, not unlike hundreds of votes that occur in the state's capitol every day. But the unanimous revision of the LA's water rights that resulted was deeply meaningful—transforming Mono Lake from a symbol of environmental destruction into a shining example of how both people and nature can have the water they need.

The Mono Lake decision was a landmark for the State Water Resources Control Board, which has authority over water rights in California. Based on broad and thorough scientific studies, the decision contemplated everything from the impact of water diversions on Mono Lake's brine shrimp and birds, to toxic dust storms, to the water needs of Los Angeles to the Public Trust duties of the state to protect Mono Lake for all the citizens of California.

The result was a decision that set an ecologically sound management level for Mono Lake, guaranteed flows for Mono's once-dry tributaries, and called for the restoration of damaged streams and waterfowl habitat.

A Decade of Recovery

On the day of the vote, back in 1994, many celebrations took place (in the crowded capitol hearing room, the Water Board itself received the only standing ovation for a decision in memory). But a walk to the lake revealed the obvious: the rules changed on that day, but Mono Lake was yet to rise. The Water Board decision, so many important words on paper, was yet to be translated into physical reality in the landscape.

Ten years out, we're seeing that ink come off the page and turn into rushing streams, green cottonwoods, darting

fish, nesting birds, a disappearing landbridge, healthier brine shrimp, and, at the core of it all, Mono Lake rising. The lake is six feet higher now, with ten feet still to go. Streamside forests that were lost in the dry years are now recovering. Toxic dust storms still blow off the exposed east shore lakebed, but as the lake rises further they are expected to diminish.

The process is far from over; much that is on paper is yet to be realized in the landscape. But the progress of ten years is heartening and inspiring, a fact easily confirmed by walking the lakeshore or along a recovering stream.

Los Angeles Prospers Too

And what of Los Angeles? Today the city is allowed just a fraction of its former water diversions. But it is not suffering as a result. The Mono Lake Committee worked tirelessly to protect Mono Lake, but it also worked just as hard to be certain that replacement water—in the form of water conservation and recycling—would offset the water returned to Mono Lake. By obtaining state and federal funding for conservation and helping to launch innovative conservation programs, the Committee was able to ensure that the water demands that endangered Mono Lake were not simply shifted to another water source, another ecosystem.

Today, Los Angeles is one of the most water efficient cities in the country and programs linked to Mono Lake's protection have had huge success. The city's toilet retrofit program, for example, has replaced over a million water guzzling toilets with new water saving models, making it the centerpiece of a conservation program that is saving over 100,000 acre-feet of water per year—the amount of water once diverted from Mono Lake!

In fact, the water conservation

programs have sparked valuable educational connections between the city and the source of its water. The Committee's Outdoor Experiences program began when Los Angeles community groups engaged in conservation came for a week to Mono Lake, to see the place they were part of saving. The experience was so striking, and the connection so strong, that the program has grown to serve hundreds of youth; the future holds the promise of connecting even more urban youth with Mono Lake.

A Decade's Lesson

In the decade since the Water Board decision, the Committee has learned that although water diversions were by far and away the single largest threat to Mono Lake, other threats arise in their absence. The fight to protect the lake for ourselves and future generations is a fight to be sure that the everyday political processes of our human world include, respect, and protect this most wonderful of saline lakes.

There is much yet to be done at Mono Lake: much more restoration, much more education, much more protection. The final words of the Mono Lake Newsletter Water Board Celebration issue still apply a decade later: "We invite you to polish up your 'Long Live Mono Lake' bumpersticker and stay with us for the important, exciting times ahead." ❖

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