

INYO COUNTY



COUNTY INFORMATION

Size: 26,488 sq. kilometers (10,227 sq. miles)
Population: 17, 945 (as of 2000 U.S. Census)
Location: Southern Sierra, Central California
Official Website: www.countyofinyo.org

CONSERVATION STORY

Owens Valley Committee Turn Tides of LADWP Aqueducts

In December of 2006, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power began returning millions of gallons of water back to the Owens Valley, marking a triumph for the Lower Owens River Project. After 96 controversial years of diverting water from the Owens River to Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) has finally agreed to send some water back.



Since 1913, the LADWP has diverted the Owens River hundreds of miles to Los Angeles via the LA aqueduct built by William Mullholand. Currently, the two aqueducts from the Owens Valley supply Los Angeles residents, agricultural communities, and other water interests with about half their water supply. Together the aqueducts convey about 780 cubic feet per second of water from the Valley or 570,000 acre feet per year.

Because of this diversion, the town of Los Angeles has grown from approximately 400,000 people in 1913 to a current population of over 3,450,000. But while the aqueduct caused the city of Los Angeles to flourish, Owens Valley suffered. Over the past 90 years the area known as “The Deepest Valley” has suffered from the impacts from groundwater pumping, and dust from the dry Owens Lake bed has become a toxic health hazard during dust storms.

Bitter rural unrest stains the first aqueduct’s history. During the building of the first aqueduct, farmers in the Owens Valley had virtually no legal recourse to stop the aqueduct, and in the battle for water men were lynched, towns were thrown into economic decline, and farms and livelihoods were destroyed.



In 1970, however, hope emerged in the form of the landmark California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which laid environmental grounds for monitoring the aqueduct. That same year, the LADWP completed its second aqueduct to extract water from the Owens Valley for Los Angeles.

Inyo residents and conservationists noted that groundwater pumping to fill the second aqueduct had not begun until after CEQA took affect and thus required an “Environmental Impact Report” (EIR). The aqueduct’s builders had failed to file an EIR, so in 1972 Inyo County filed a lawsuit against the LADWP for the environmental impacts of groundwater pumping.

As noted by Inyo residents, groundwater pumping and surface diversions had tremendous environmental impacts on the Valley. Soil erosion was severe and dust storms were common. Vegetation dependent upon groundwater and surface water died off, and wildlife dependent on the affected vegetation subsequently suffered.

Furthermore, it was shown that the dust storms that Owens residents had been breathing for decades contained particulate matter pollution at concentrations that severely exceeded the limits set by the Clean Air Act.

It took almost twenty years, three inadequate EIRs and several lawsuits later for the LADWP to finally file a complete Final EIR to Inyo County for the aqueduct in 1991.

The FEIR stipulated that LADWP would implement the Lower Owens River Project to mitigate for some of the most direct effects on alkali meadows and on wildlife in the Valley.

The Lower Owens River Project (LORP) arose as a mitigation measure for some of these



impacts that effected most directly on the watershed and wildlife there. The LORP was further elucidated by the Long Term Water Agreement between LADWP, the State of California, the Sierra Club, the Owens Valley Committee, and Inyo County in 1997. The LORP is the largest river restoration effort of its kind in the Western United States, and aims to bring the Lower Owens River back to life with a river bed base flow of forty cubic feet per second, or approximately

ten percent of the water usually taken from the Owens Valley region.

The Lower Owens River Project has four main uses. The first is to re-water a 62 mile stretch of the Lower Owens River, in the expectation that meadow and wetland habitat will reestablish and provide a place for species dependent on those habitats. The second goal is to maintain or improve the Owens River Delta's wetland and aquatic habitats. Third, the LORP will seasonally flood 1,500 acres of off-river area for Blackrock area waterfowl and other species, and maintaining several off-river ponds. Lastly, the LORP will maintain several other off-river lakes and pools.

Mike Prather has been with the Owens Valley Committee since it formed in 1984. The OVC is a non-profit, all-volunteer community group that oversees the implementation of the LORP. It was formed in late 1983 when Inyo County and the LADWP began to discuss a long term water agreement, from which the Lower Owens River Project arose as a mitigation measure.

“When I began this in 1984, I was much younger,” began Prather in a phone interview. “Now I’m grey and old. Many of the people that fought for the valley early in the century are gone now.” (He is referring to the many local citizen groups that have periodically formed to oppose various aspects of the aqueduct and LADWP decisions affecting the Owens Valley.) “So, it’s incredible to see this for myself,” he concludes.

Prather says that as of September of 2007 the effects of the 2006 re-watering are beginning to show.

“Some fish have already moved into the re-watered stretch. Willows are beginning to colonize the banks. Cattails and emergent vegetation are popping up in the channel itself. Some bird species that nest in those are too, like the Marsh Wren, and the Common

Yellow Throated Wren, which are indicators of good marsh wetland habitat. Also, water is spreading outside of the channels, and has created a lot of ponds. So waterfowl have began appearing and have made attempts to turn some of these pools into habitat.”



Still, conservationists like the OVC and others are keeping a watchful eye on the project. Prather says that the LORP still falls short of the 1997 MOU in several ways, and the OVC is watching to ensure that the LORP eventually meets the MOU goals.

If you would like to visit, volunteer with, become a member of, donate to, or find out more about the Owens Valley Committee please see their group information in this section of the directory and visit their website at www.ovcweb.org.

ORGANIZATIONS

California Native Plant Society – Bristlecone Chapter

Contact Name: Sherryl Taylor, President
Address: P.O. Box 364, Bishop, CA 93515
Phone: 760-924-8742
Email: staylor@npgcable.com
Website URL: www.bristleconecnps.org

Counties of Activity: Inyo, Kern, Mono
Issue Focus: botanical
Group Type: education, conservation, advocacy

Public Events: bi-monthly program meetings, field trips, Sojourn (weekend of native plant field trips and programs), Mary DeDecker Native Plant Garden, annual plant sale, highway cleanup

Volunteer Opportunities: leading field trips, working in Mary DeDecker Native Plant Garden, writing letters/attending meetings to advocate for the protection of native plants, growing native plants for plant sale, field trips to remove invasive weeds, hosting educational booths

Accepts Donations: Yes

Description: The Bristlecone Chapter of the California Native Plant Society seeks to increase the public’s knowledge and enjoyment of native plants and to protect native

plants for future generations. We lead field trips to Death Valley, the northern Mojave Desert, the Inyo and White Mountains, the Owens Valley and the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada, following the bloom. Our programs, held in Bishop, Mammoth, Lone Pine and Ridgecrest, focus on local native plants and their ecosystems. We collect seeds, grow our own plants for our annual sale, and is the only organization that sells local native plants in our chapter area. Our Mary DeDecker Botanical Grant program supports research on local native plants and helps support the Native Plant Project where 4th graders at Mammoth Elementary School learn about and grow native plants and plant them to restore areas around their school. While our members work in many ways to protect the local environment, our chapter, since its inception in 1984, has advocated for the protection of the Owens Valley from excessive groundwater pumping.

Eastern Sierra Land Trust

Contact Name: Karen Ferrell-Ingram

Address: PO Box 755, Bishop, CA 93514

Phone: 760.873.4554

Email: karen@eslt.org

Website URL: www.easternsierralandtrust.org

Counties of Activity: Alpine, Inyo, Mono

Issue Focus: air quality, botanical, land use, water supply, watershed quality, wildlife and habitat

Group Type: volunteer, staffed

Public Events: Wildlife Migration Festival

Volunteer Opportunities: monitoring, restoration, office support

Accepts Donations: yes

Description: The ESLT is a land trust that works mostly with private landowners in the Eastern Sierra to conserve their land for wildlife, historical, recreational, botanical, watershed, farming, and ranching values.

Friends of the Inyo

Contact Name: Paul McFarland

Address: 699 West Line, Suite A, Bishop, CA 93514

Phone: 760.873.6500

Email: info@friendsoftheinyo.org

Website URL: www.friendsoftheinyo.org

Counties of Activity: Inyo, Mono

Resource Focus: botanical, land use, water supply, watershed quality, wildlife and habitat

Group Type: advocacy, stewardship, educational outreach, forestry, recreation

Volunteer Opportunities: (contact Friends of the Inyo)

Accepts Donations: Yes

Description: Friends of the Inyo is dedicated to preserving the public lands and wildlife of the Eastern Sierra. We help citizens get involved in the management of the lands we all share, bringing Preservation, Exploration and Stewardship to the mountains, deserts and creeks of Inyo and Mono Counties. Contact us to find out about coming along for a hike, joining in a volunteer project, or to get more information on the issues facing the Eastern Sierra's wild places.

Owens Valley Committee

Contact Name: Nancy Prather

Address: Drawer D

Phone: 760.876.1845

Email: info@ovcweb.org

Website URL: www.ovcweb.org

County of Activity: Inyo

Issue Focus: air quality, botanical, land use, water supply, watershed quality, wildlife and habitat

Group Type: advocacy, stewardship, educational outreach

Volunteer Opportunities: (contact the Owens Valley Committee)

Accepts Donations: Yes

Description: The Owens Valley Committee is a non-profit citizen action group dedicated to the protection, restoration and sustainable management of water and land resources affecting Owens Valley. The Owens Valley Committee participates in water and land management issues on lands owned by Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP). The Committee monitors the Long-term Water Agreement between Inyo County and the City of Los Angeles that is attempting to "cooperatively" manage water and land resources on 200,000 acres of the Owens Valley that is owned by Los Angeles. Issues include LADWP groundwater pumping for export and its impacts, T & E species, re-watering of 62 miles of the Lower Owens River (riparian and fishery), wildlife and wetlands protection at Owens Lake, native spring protection and restoration. The OVC is a member of the MOU Group that supervises the implementation of the Lower Owens River Project.

Save Round Valley Alliance Advocates for Smart Growth

Contact Name: Jennifer Fenton

Address: 757 Rome Drive, Bishop CA 93514
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Email: jenni@redjellyfish.net
Website URL: www.saveroundvalley.org

County of Activity: Inyo

Issue Focus: air quality, land use, water supply, watershed quality

Group Type: advocacy, stewardship, coalition, educational outreach

Volunteer Opportunities: (contact SRVA Advocates for Smart Growth)

Accepts Donations: Yes

Description: SRVA Advocates for Smart Growth is a grassroots organization working to protect and enhance the quality of life in Inyo County by encouraging appropriate planning and development that safeguard our natural environment, our regional economy, and the interests of local residents. To this end we are currently utilizing CEQA process to encourage county officials to deny projects that conflict blatantly with the land use goals listed in the Inyo County General Plan. Two projects we are currently working on are the Pine Creek Communities Development and the Whitney Portal Preserve. These two projects have negative impacts that could ultimately lead to the destruction of the Owens Valley.

PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND AGENCIES

Inyo County Board of Supervisors

Mailing Address: Board of Supervisors Room
County Administrative Center
224 North Edwards
Independence, California
Website: http://www.inyocounty.us/board_agenda.htm

Senate Representative – 18th District

Counties Represented: Kern, Tulare, Inyo and San Bernardino
Website: <http://republican.sen.ca.gov/web/18/pro.asp>

Assembly Representative – 34th District

Counties Represented:
Website: <http://republican.assembly.ca.gov/members/a34/index.aspx>

