

PUBLIC LANDS ROUNDTABLE MINUTES

Meeting Location: BLM Ridgecrest Office

Minutes of: July 25, 2024

Called to order at: 6:00pm by Co-Chairman Charlie Hattendorf

Pledge of allegiance was led by Charlie Hattendorf.

A MOTION was made by Libby Vincent 2nd by Mark Mason or John Auburn to approve the May 23, 2024 minutes. They were approved as sent.

PLRT MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE: John Auburn, Barbara Bain, Arzell Hale, Mary Grimsley, Charlie Hattendorf, Beverly Hill, Raymond Kelso, Will Liebscher, Mark Mason, Sam Merk, Hector Villalobos, Libby Vincent, and BLM Jim Watson.

Guests: George & Susan Croll,

BLM UPDATES: by Jim Watson, Chief Law Enforcement Officer, R/C BLM

Jim is substituting for Tom Bickauskas who had a last minute conflict. Jim has been on a security detail on a fire in Northern California in Arcadia & Eureka and was not briefed before the meeting.

LAW ENFORCEMENT: We have 3 Law Enforcement Rangers in the field here and 4 Law Enforcement Rangers are out on the fires to manage camp security and government assets. If you are security qualified, any officer from the Department of the Interior (BLM, Forest Service, etc.) can be called for security. Jim is also qualified as a Fire Investigator, so can also be called out for that duty.

FIRES: Jim reported that the recent fire on Black Mountain in the El Paso's was lightening caused. There was no lightening that day, but a few day before there was dry lightning. Dry lightning can actually start a fire up to 3 to 5 days later, because of the intense heat and it can burrow down into the ground. Most of the fires right now are lightning strikes, some are human caused, a couple are target shooting with wrong ammo. George asked what is the liability of human caused, like the couple of kids playing with fireworks down in Riverside that burned 5 homes? Are the parents held responsible? The fire that was caused by the couple's reveal party, they were held responsible, like \$1M.

+ There are no fires allowed right now due to the elevated red flag warnings, so no open fires, no smudge pots, no "campfire in a can". When the fire warnings go down, as long as you can turn it off, they are legal. The red flag warning is north of Hwy 58 and west of Hwy 14, it's all fire restrictions, shooting restrictions. Go on the BLM page for fire restrictions.

+ Will sees quite often, vehicles with chains dragging & making sparks, or flat tires/rims causing sparks, & he has on occasion had to put out a fire started alongside the highway. He will call CHP and report it. If you call 911, they will tell you to call BLM. You can call dispatch and if the BLM can respond to it, they will.

+ Mary asked if everyone was aware of the app, WATCH DUTY, that is a terrific site for keeping track of fires and the latest info regarding fires all over California and the U.S.

OHV TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS: There have been no off-road accidents in the last 2 months.

+ Will brought up that there is a meeting of the State Parks OHV Division having a huge get together in San Diego at the end of this month for 4 days, with tours. They are going to be talking about education for off-roading and licensing, etc. You might be able to find out more info on the Friends of Jawbone website. They have not had a meeting like this in at least 2 to 3 years. All the heads from the state will be attending. Will commented that the State, in his opinion, is not yet ready to impose any rules or licenses or anything else on people operating side-by-sides (SXS).

+ Jim Watson mentioned that in January, sometimes February, because the BLM accepts and uses California State Parks & Recreation Division OHV grant money, that the BLM hosts an open house here as part of the grant process which helps to pay for extra patrols and some equipment that we have that they pay for. It's a public meeting that is required for the grant.

+ Sam requested that the BLM go out to the schools and talk to the kids about visiting the desert and the responsible use and recreation out on public lands. The parents will learn from their kids, as kids get excited when they learn things and want to share with their parents. Jim did respond that the BLM does go out to Career Day at Murray Middle School, with their UTV and the kids crawl all over it. Sam suggested going out to the elementary school in Inyokern, where the kids are more likely to go out on public land but don't have the proper instruction. Trona would also be a good place to visit the school.

+ Charlie used to do gold panning demonstrations, gave the kids a history lesson on what brought people to California and the mining history. The kids dressed up as miners and girls in long dresses, and really were eager to learn.

+ Will brought up that Kern County gives out a \$10,000 award each year for education. Will suggested that the BLM apply for it, as Friends of Jawbone received the award. Either Barbara or Bev mentioned that there is a lot of educating in the schools by the Maturango Museum.

STAFFING: We're hurting. We have offered a job for a new biologist and they are supposed to start in October. They have selected a new field manager and his start date is August 25. Tom Bickauskas will be the Assistant Field Manager and has been in the Acting position for over a year. The two Geologist / Mineral positions are on the list. This District Office has taken over all the hiring for the district because of funding cuts, so they are prioritizing the hiring and taken it out of the hands of the Field Office Manager. We need \$4.2 million to run the office, they were going to give us \$3.7 million, and we got \$3.3 million, so we're hurting. We are down a lot of positions and we don't have the funding. We have 18 employees now, but we're supposed to have 38. We only have 3 wranglers up at the corrals, with the corral manager taking a job in Elko and the other person took another job in California City. One of the wranglers is acting as the facility manager. There's approximately 1,000 head up at the corrals. We do not have a geologist or biologist right now.

+ Mark Mason wanted to thank the BLM and Tom, in particular, for help the Quail Forever group. One of the group members had hiked into the guzzler out by Squaw Spring when it was really hot, and it was dry. He counted over 100 birds around the guzzler, so he reached out to Tom and Tom reached out to the archeologist. The road out to Squaw Spring is red tagged, so the archeologist us out and we filled the guzzler

GUEST SPEAKER:

George Croll, IWV Water District Manager:

Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) is a good thing. The water in our aquifers, a big underground lake, is going down, and we all have our wells going down there and that is where we get all our water. The levels have been declining, so it's a real problem and something that needs to be dealt with. The Groundwater Authority's solution is to build a 50-mile pipeline. I believe the cost is exorbitant, so to boil it down into the simplest terms, if you live in Ridgecrest or live in the water district, your water bill is likely to triple when we get this water pipeline built. So if your water bill is \$100/month now, it will be \$300, if it's now \$200 it will be \$600/month 6 years from now. It is a really expensive project. I don't know how many details you want, but spent some money to do a real analysis and the Federal government just approved \$50 million to help build this pipeline, they wanted \$150 million, and maybe we'll eventually get a \$150 million. The Groundwater Authority (GA) says "oh we're getting \$150 million and everything is good and we'll be fine" but the pipeline itself, we used their estimate of what the pipeline would cost and then we deducted the \$150 million and figured out what it be to borrow the other \$50 million, what it's going to cost to buy the water rights, what it's going to cost to operate and maintain it, and all these other things get added in and it adds up almost tripling our budget. We're not trying to spread the costs around right now, we'll talk a little about the impacts of Mojave Pistachios, who lost their case in court, so I think they're negotiating with the GA how they exit out of the valley. Meadowbrook Pistachios, which has been here longer, their still operating under this ... they were given an amount of water, and they are still using that. Searles Valley Minerals (SVM) owes the GA \$10 to \$20 million, something like that, and they're in court. So the GA, so they're the next to take action, a similar case as Mojave Pistachios lost, which is very similar to the case against SVM, and if it goes the same way in court will be told to pay the GA their \$20 million or shut down your wells. We consider that to be a pretty significant impact to the local community. But if you look into the future, you're going to see there's going to be almost a certainty that here will be no farming, or only some very small farms left, maybe by 2040, maybe those with a few acres that have their own well. Generally farming is going to be gone. They now use about half the water in the valley, so about 20,000-acre feet of water use per year, so that's going to go down to 10,000-acre feet per year. You always have to keep in mind that LADWP ships through those 2 pipelines 250,000-acre feet a few miles away from here. It goes by us every year and literally the difference between what we can cut down to if farming goes away and what we need is a few thousand acre feet, 3, 4, or 5 thousand at the most, and so the fact that we can't come to a political solution where somehow we can make a deal instead of building this pipeline costing half-a-billion dollars and it falls almost entirely, so deduct \$150 million from that, that cost falls, the vast bulk of it, will fall on the people here in Ridgecrest who pay water bills. We don't know if SVM will ultimately pay the \$20 million and pay the \$6 or \$7 million a year costs to keep getting water this way.

Charlie asked "Isn't there a question about the cost of the acre feet done by the GA vs what has been applied in other basins? Like the highest one in California? Really exorbitant?"

George: There's sort of a standard in "water world", how much is it going to cost me to get an acre foot of water, sort of this average cost; what if I take the water from the sewer plant and I treat to a level that I can inject it back into the aquifer, let it percolate through the dirt, and that's \$3,000 to \$4,000 an acre foot. \$5,000 is what our experts tell us, if you live in a really rich community ... you're in Silicon Valley ... they might spend \$5,000 or \$6,000 an acre foot to get more water. The cost of the water from this pipeline is going to be \$10,000+ an acre foot, so it's like going to be more expensive than what the people in Silicon Valley would pay. So, it's really expensive, so if SVM were to find water elsewhere, or are unable to pay for the water from the pipeline, 100% of the cost would fall on the people of Ridgecrest. So we at the water district, I'm a big fan of SVM, and I think if we were to drive them out of the valley or they were to somehow not be in business, that would be a terrible economic impact. People talk about when the base had a big BRAC 20 years ago, it would be a similar kind of impact. It's a significant thing.

Will mentioned that SVM is the largest contributor to the tax base to San Bernardino County. He then said that he figured, when this all got started, that it would get down to litigation between the counties, the city, & the Feds, 4 entities. Has it gotten to that yet?

George: No.

Arzell brought up the fact that SVM was pumping water out of this valley in the 1930's before Ridgecrest came, the base came, and the GWA will not recognize any of our water rights.

George: That's kind of what ... the water district filed an adjudication ... it's a big lawsuit where we can divide up the water that would be considered by the courts does not get considered by the GWA, like how long have you been here, how long have you been pumping water, so like a place like SVM they have a water right that gets precedence because they've been here the longest. There are people who have overlying rights as they're sitting over the water, the Navy has rights because it's the Federal government, and all that gets sorted out in court. The court isn't always fair, but it's better than a group of politicians deciding who gets what. Arzell agreed that it would be the best thing for everybody. George agreed and that is why the water district is proceeding with this lawsuit and we hope it gets a fair trial. People may not like to hear it, but Meadowbrook has been here since the '70's and been pumping water for a long too. They may very well have a water right as well. That's how it works. There might be some things you like, some things you don't. We would like to see that lawsuit come to an end, it's done, we divide up the water rights and then move on to a stage where we try to figure out, like we can use recycled water that's more cost effective. The bottom line is we spent some time and effort to look at what this pipeline would cost the residents of the valley ... it's pretty excessive ... and really high. There are other, more difficult political paths to pursue with Inyo County; there are other things we can do immediately ... we can use recycled water. Quite frankly, we disagree with the GWA about how much water is down there and how fast it's going away and how much is actually being recharged into the basin, and you want the amount that you pump out to be the same as what is going in every year. Now that probably changes year to year, as we have some wet years, so we don't see that real rapidly, as it takes a long time for water to flow underground. Our message is that there is a coalition of groups opposed to the GWA's proposed pipeline project; the Relators Association is getting a little spun up because they are worried about the economic impacts; I think Searles and the water district are on that side. I think there are a lot of concerns about the environmental impacts ... the Mojave Ground Squirrel ... the pipeline would go through Desert Tortoise habitat. So we'll see how it goes in the future, and everyone gets to decide what they think is a reasonable cost ... I have people tell me ... well in San Diego people pay on average \$300 a month for water, so it's fine to do it here. But I don't think it's the same people living here that live in San Diego and would be able to pay \$200 & \$300 water bills. I think you have to look at this community, and I'm from the outside ... I'm not the guy whose lived here for 40 years, and I look around and talk to people and I just don't see this community being a place where people being able to manage \$200 and \$300 water bills, with the other inflation going on, the price of food, and all the other stuff going on. It's tough.

Barbara asked if they had decided on a path yet for the pipeline ... there's 3 potential paths?

George: Coming up across the mountains, under 395 and up 395, possibly following Garlock. I'm sure it is not totally decided, and there is the NEPA process that needs to be followed and they need to look at all the alternatives. That is their preferred option, I believe.

Bev asked if an alternative to a pipeline has been discussed, like recycled water?

George: I think recycled water from the waste water treatment plant would give us another 1500-acre feet a year, so in our world that puts us 10,000/12,000 and that's enough for today. We need more for the future, so the water districts view is the way ahead is ... there are state requirements that say the city is going to build a waste water treatment plant ... they have to, and when they do there are state requirements that they have to do something with that water. The most sensible thing to do is to put it back in the aquifer and then it helps to replenish the aquifer, 1500-acre feet more. That gives us above 10,000-acre feet to sort of divide up among

the people, and if you take farming out of the picture that's enough for us to get by ... the Navy, Searles, the Water District, the little guys, small pumpers. It doesn't give us a ton of room to grow, but gives us time to sort of ... you know ... our estimate is there is 40 million acre feet of water down there, the GWA says there is 2 million acre feet. I can tell you why their numbers are so bad ... they took a small area and went down 200 feet, and I have a 1,000 foot deep well that I can draw up out of ... their science isn't the greatest.

Bev asked if the pipeline a done deal or can we argue our way out of it?

George: The federal government just gave them \$50 million, so you tell me; they're pushing hard and there is the potential for law-suits on the environmental side. This is a case where Vince Fong needs to hear from you.

Charlie asked, then how do we go forward with this, how do we make a statement?

George: Supervisor Phillip Peters is the chairman of the GA.

Charlie said we understand that they have an agenda. Who would contact Inyo? The political questions.

George: I have been working on meeting with them (Inyo). First we need to get all the people in this valley on the same page. If we were all in lock-step ... the GA and us and know the way we want to go, we might be able to work something out. I fully respect why Inyo is so reticent to let someone else steal more water from them. But when you talk about 250,000 acre feet flowing right by us and we have to build a pipeline an extra 40 or 50 miles through the desert, when we could just go over there and get it ...

Jim Watson, citizen, asked where do they plan getting the water from?

George: Going down Hwy 14, have you ever seen those 4 big tanks as you're going into Mojave? That's where it starts, 36-million gallons of water in those tanks. That water flows over to Cal City, they're going to connect to Cal City, but the problem is there, that they can't flow enough water through that section, so we're going to build this 50-mile pipeline, initially call half a billion dollars, then somewhere in the future they have to build another \$30 million to \$40 million pipeline to get back to that big water tank on the 14.

Citizen Jim: Where does that water come from?

George: That water starts at Lake Shasta, comes down to the Delta, gets pumped to the San Luis Reservoir, part of the State Water Project, goes past Bakersfield and pumped up the hill and is in the Antelope Valley, percolates into the aquifer, pumped out of Rosamond, goes through their treatment plant and out into the system. It's the wackiest thing ever. This SGMA thing, we're not in nearly as bad of shape as the San Joaquin Valley where they're estimating that Kern County could lose a couple hundred-thousand acres of farming due to this bill, and they're going to have to just shut down. It's going to be as devastating as the tax revenue from farming would stop, just like it did for the oil drilling in Kern County that got shut down. So now they're going to do it to farming, and even if we were to take just 3 - 4 thousand acre feet, we're just taking it from people who need it as bad as we do, or worse, so you kind of go like, what are we really doing here? And then of course, there's this whole thing with the State Water Project that's really wacky; you're connected to that system, I used to run the military base that was connected into that system, and so our base paid \$5 million dollars to be connected to the system, but we didn't get a drop of water for that, we just paid \$5 million dollars a year to be connected to it. That was to pay our infrastructure costs. And then they tell you every year how much water you're going to get. There were years we paid \$5 million dollars and our allocation was zero. There were years we got 100% of our allocation, years we got 50%, so like you're in this weird system, you're going to build this 50-mile pipeline, then you have to buy the water rights to have the water rights, but get half, or 15% or 10% of your water rights, so it's just a wacky scheme. I've been here almost a year, I tried to come in with an open mind, have talked to those guys and let them give me all of their arguments this is a good idea and it's the only way to solve our problem. The other day, not because I work for the Water District, I work for the board, so as an engineer I looked at it and it just doesn't make sense to me because it's too expensive, too many drawbacks, there's environmental impacts, there's cost impacts, there's economic impacts to the local economy, impacts to your water bill.

Will: You're the guy to lead the charge against it. You should invoke the powers of San Bernardino County because you contribute so much and get SB County to say we're not going to lose our tax base. Maybe it would take it to the Federal level and maybe they'd listen to you and you had water first.

George: So this is why I'm here, to do my best to educate and I try to fair. There is a real problem and we have to do something about it, I just don't know if the proposed solution is the best one for this valley or this community.

Citizen Jim asked "how come we're not getting our water from 10 miles away?"

George: Because LADWP owns that water and I have actually met with them. There are potential ways to work that in the future, but we've got to get through this adjudication first. The first step is to divide the water up ... you can't decide how much we need or who needs what until you, and how much you actually have the right to. We feel that's the first step. Then we can move on to the solution part.

A lively conversation continued; some history was shared by Barbara Bain on DWP and Arzell about obtaining water in Searles Valley. Barbara also mentioned that the NAVY will have a problem if Ridgecrest dries up, and also commended the NAVY about how they have cut their water bill to the bone. The conversation went on for quite some time, with several people talking at once.

NEW BUSINESS:

WEBSITE UPDATE: Charlie, did add on our comment page where people can join on line, see our agenda.

+ If you have a place to go to see status of fires, weather, wind.

+ If you find a good place to find road closures, please share.

OLD BUSINESS:

+ Barbara asked about the status of the Red Rock draft plan? It seems to be in limbo.

+ Mark wanted to add that one of the retired guys (from Quail Forever) put 1800 gallons of water into the guzzlers in the Rand's and yesterday they said they put in at least 1200 gallons into some of the guzzlers in the El Paso's very close to Garlock Road. Some of the tanks are 600 gallons, others are 900 gallons. The guzzlers aren't going dry because of the heat, but because there are so many animals drinking out of them.

+ Charlie asked about Julie Hendrix as a guest speaker. Barbara has contacted her twice and she did not show. She is quite busy, her division is understaffed, she works on the base. She will be off the agenda for now.

+ Mary will call Liam Connolly a call and ask if he could give a Desert Tortoise or DTNA

Adjourned at: 7:40pm

NEXT PLR MEMBERSHIP MEETING will be 8/22/24.

Respectfully submitted, Mary Grimsley

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