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SANTA PAULA

# United Water Conservation District struggles with quaggas as reservoir conflict fades



STAR FILE PHOTO A view of Lake Piru from atop the Santa Felicia Dam in 2014 shows low water levels from ongoing drought. The United Water Conservation District, which owns the dam and reservoir, faces ongoing struggles related to invasive quagga mussels and a looming environmental lawsuit.

By *Gretchen Wenner* of the *Ventura County Star*

For the United Water Conservation District, a permanent nightmare continues since invasive quagga mussels were discovered at Lake Piru in December 2013.

Late last month, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife sent a [letter](#) (*read the letter*) saying United's draft plan for managing the infestation fell short of requirements and had been deemed



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"noncompliant." United's plan must include a method for "decontamination of water containing larval mussels," the letter says, which for United presents a unique stumbling block.

That's because the district, which owns Lake Piru and the Santa Felicia Dam in eastern Ventura County, is required by federal law to continually release a small flow from the dam into lower Piru Creek for endangered fish habitat. If it rains, larger releases can be triggered.

"Each one of those releases at this point has quagga mussel veligers that might survive," said Anthony Emmert, United's deputy general manager, referring to the mussels' microscopic, free-floating larval phase.

Filtering or chemically treating that flow is "virtually impossible," Emmert said. A technical committee comprised of local, state and federal officials has grappled with the issue for months.

The district, headquartered in Santa Paula, is a major player in local groundwater management, both for west county farmers and many residents. Lake Piru and other United facilities along the Santa Clara River are used to manage irrigation supplies for growers in the river valley and on the Oxnard Plain. Its operations also affect drinking supplies in Oxnard, Port Hueneme, Ventura, Santa Paula, Fillmore and at Naval Base Ventura County.

The Fish and Wildlife letter also dinged United for an "illegal conveyance of mussel from Lake Piru" after a boat owner took his vessel to a repair shop in early January, bypassing the exit inspection and decontamination process. District staff headed to the repair shop in North Hollywood where, under supervision of state officials, they removed mussels from the boat and returned them to a designated pile at Lake Piru.

The highly destructive species breeds prolifically,

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clogging pumps and pipes by attaching in thick clusters. The coin-sized invader was likely introduced to Lake Piru by a pleasure boat, officials say. It is the only such infestation in Ventura County. The mollusks were first found in California in early 2007. Along with zebra mussels, they have proved nearly impossible to eradicate in large bodies such as Lake Piru and require costly ongoing maintenance.

The drought has so far kept the infestation from spreading beyond the lake and lower Piru Creek.

The district plans to meet with Fish and Wildlife officials to discuss options for its quagga plan.

"It's a unique reservoir," Emmert said of Lake Piru. "I'm not sure there are any others in California infested with quagga that must release all the time like this."

On another front, the district faces a federal lawsuit from the Wishtoyo Foundation and the Center for Biological Diversity. The groups last week filed a notice saying they intended to sue under the Endangered Species Act for harm caused to endangered steelhead trout and other species by United's Vern Freeman Diversion Dam. The Freeman diversion, near Saticoy, routes river flows to facilities used to replenish groundwater supplies.

Mauricio Guardado Jr., United's general manager, called the notice a disappointment.

"We have spent so many years and millions of ratepayers' dollars to analyze and come up with solutions to mitigate many of these allegations they state in the document," he said. United is currently working on a habitat conservation plan to address endangered species habitat and is also designing an updated fish passage for the Freeman diversion.

There is a bright spot for the district.

## Beyoncé bounce comes too late for Red Lobster in Thousand Oaks



Oxnard's recycled water could soon make its way to farmers east of the city now that a dispute involving a pair of agricultural reservoirs United owns in Camarillo has been ironed out.

A legal tussle erupted last summer between United and the Pleasant Valley County Water District in Camarillo, which supplies growers on the eastern Oxnard Plain. Pleasant Valley, which operates the reservoirs, wants Oxnard's recycled water. Because the recycled supply is strictly regulated, United worried about liability if it got in the reservoirs.

The situation was solved last month with an agreement approved by the boards of both districts. In addition, hookups to a third district's pipeline have been installed as a temporary measure until Oxnard can build its own delivery system.

"We're ready to go," said John Mathews, Pleasant Valley's attorney. "We're just keeping an eye on the weather."

Delivery is being delayed until the threat of El Niño-related rains diminishes in coming months. That's because the borrowed pipeline contains briny discharge and will need to be dewatered before the recycled supply is introduced, Mathews said. If it rains, the dewatering process would need to start over.

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**About Gretchen Wenner**

Gretchen Wenner covers Oxnard city hall and local groundwater.

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