

Spring/Summer 2023

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Water lines

News you can use from your Sunnyslope Water District

Storms ease drought—for now

Thanks to the atmospheric rivers that pummeled California earlier this year, mandatory water conservation regulations have been rescinded in the Hollister area—but voluntary conservation remains in effect. The San Luis Reservoir near Los Banos which supplies our local surface water is now full, after dropping to less than one-quarter capacity last October during the prolonged drought. As a result, the San Benito County Water District (SBCWD, our water provider) has received a 100 percent surface water allocation (8,500 acre-feet) for 2023, which hasn't happened for the last six years. This comes on the heels of 2022 when we received zero water allocation, and 2021, when we received 25 percent. With both treatment plants now operational (see page 2) we will maximize our use of surface water this year, which will conserve local groundwater and improve water quality for everyone.



Heavy rains made way for a spectacular local wildflower season. Shown here are California poppies blooming at Pinnacles National Monument in April. Photo by Steve Zamek, San Jose

Preparing for more frequent droughts

Rather than being a sign that drought danger is over, the recent storms are a harbinger of the radical swings in weather we can expect from the climate crisis: severe storms and flooding, and hotter, drier, more frequent droughts. To meet this challenge, the SBCWD is working on an Accelerated Drought Response Project (ADRoP) that will more than double our local capacity to capture available water in wet years like 2023.

The project includes the drilling of five wells where surface water we receive from the San Luis Reservoir can be injected into underground aquifers and pulled out for later use. New pipeline infrastructure will allow the West Hills Water Treatment Plant to increase water production from 4.5 million gallons per day (MGD) to 6.7 MGD, significantly improving local water resiliency during times of drought. SBCWD is now evaluating site locations for the project, funded by a \$1.8 million grant from the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). An additional \$11.5 million DWR grant will be used for construction. (Cont. on page 3)



**¿Prefieres tu
newsletter en español?**

Por favor, visite sunnyslopewater.org
y haga clic en el enlace del
boletín para ver o descargar.
¡Muchas gracias!

**Win a \$100 gift
card when you
sign up for
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billing or
autopay!**



Get two chances to
win when you sign up
for both! Just click on the contest
icon at sunnyslopewater.org to enroll,
and you'll be automatically entered
to win a \$100 gift card to The Baler
steakhouse at the Pendergrass in
historic downtown Hollister. We
congratulate our most recent winner,
Richard A. Romero, and thank our
many conscientious customers who
have already signed up to save time
and money, and reduce their carbon
footprint (see article, page 2).

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Sunnyslope's water leak record is excellent!

Water leaks are inevitable when you maintain many miles of pipeline infrastructure. All urban water suppliers are required to submit third-party-validated water loss audits to the state each year. Each provider's annual water loss is compared to their "Unavoidable Annual Water Loss," which is the minimum water loss that could be achieved from a similar water system if all current best technology could be successfully applied.

In 2022, Sunnyslope's Unavoidable Annual Water Loss was 41.13 million gallons, and our actual loss was 41.09 million gallons—even better than the best feasible goal! These two numbers determine each water provider's Infrastructure Leak Index (ILI). In 2022, our ILI was 0.999, compared to the 1.8 average of all California water agencies, which puts us in the top percentage of water savers. In fact, Sunnyslope's ILI has been less than 1.2 since audits began in 2015. Our excellent scores are a result of diligent maintenance to ensure that our community has the most cost-effective and efficient water system possible.



Sunnyslope Water District

Providing reliable, high-quality, cost-effective water and sanitary services to our community, to protect human health and the environment

3570 Airline Hwy, Hollister, CA 95023
(831) 637-4670 • sunnyslopewater.org
Open Monday-Friday, 8 am to 5 pm

Free 24-hour emergency service:

If you think your water meter is leaking, or you see water gushing in the street, it is an emergency. Do not hesitate to contact us at (831) 637-4670, day or night! Our on-call staff will return your call immediately.

The public is welcome to attend Sunnyslope Water District board meetings, held every third Tuesday of the month at 5:15 pm. To attend remotely via Zoom, please click the board meeting link at sunnyslopewater.org.

Board of Directors

Dorothy (Dee) Brown President
Ed Mauro, Vice-president
Mike Alcorn
Jerry Buzzetta
James Parker

General Manager

Drew Lander, P.E.

5,350

households on paperless/autopay

Over 72 percent of our 7,392 customers have made the switch to paperless and/or autopay to save time, money, hassle, and the planet. Sign up now to win a \$100 gift card (see page one) and help keep water bills as low as possible.

With an online account you have immediate access to current and past statements, and you can track your usage over months and years. Schedule a secure payment with a few clicks, or set it and forget it with autopay. Customize alerts for outages, boil notices, maintenance near your home, and more.

Sign-up is quick and easy. Just visit sunnyslopewater.org and click the WaterSmart sign-in. If you need assistance please don't hesitate to call us at 637-4670!



sunnyslopewater.org



HAS YOUR E-MAIL ADDRESS CHANGED? Don't miss out on important water alerts for your neighborhood. Update your contact information at sunnyslopewater.org!

Improved water quality with plants back online

The **West Hills Water Treatment Plant** is back online after a tractor trailer collided with a power pole last November, damaging critical machinery at the facility. During the freak accident, high- and low-voltage lines crossed, bypassing the plant's extensive surge protections and short-circuiting sensitive equipment.

With supply chains still in disarray nationwide, computer chips and other electronics had to be backordered, and manufacturers required months to build new components which used to be readily available. As a result, our community had to rely on groundwater alone during the four-month shut-down.

Thankfully, as of March 10 the plant is back online and operating at peak efficiency thanks to the comprehensive maintenance we performed during shut-down. The upcoming West Hills expansion (see article, page one) will incorporate new technology to enhance surge protection and protect water reliability. We are also adjusting budgets to stockpile some expensive but critical pieces of equipment that previously were only purchased when needed.

The **Lessalt Water Treatment Plant** was closed for over 17 months beginning in August 2021 after we lost our imported surface water allocation due to the statewide drought. During that time, we performed extensive maintenance that can only occur when equipment is offline. Since we received our full water allocation this year (see page one,) we will be operating both of our plants at maximum capacity to treat and distribute as much imported surface water from the San Luis Reservoir as possible. This will improve water quality, reduce demand on our groundwater, and conserve surface water stored in our local San Justo Reservoir.



A LONG WAY TO FLOW

Surface water which originated as snow and rain in the Sierra Nevada range flows through our local West Hills Water Treatment Plant. Here, Sunnyslope Water Superintendent Jose J. Rodriguez inspects filtration at the plant clarifier.

How do Sunnyslope fees compare to other water providers?

Approximate monthly water bill comparison for average household

(500 gallons per day; 15,000-gallon monthly total)



City of Santa Cruz	San Jose Water	San Juan Bautista	City of Hollister	Sunnyslope Water District
\$345	\$187	\$172	\$124	\$111

Sunnyslope Water District is a local nonprofit agency, voted into existence by ratepayers. Our budget goal is to match revenue to expenses, leaving no profit. We have not raised rates in over four years, and have consistently charged the lowest rates of all providers in our region.



Tres Pinos Water District is one of three small local water providers that will be consolidated into the Sunnyslope system.

Annexations provide new customers

Sunnyslope Water is working cooperatively to consolidate three separate local water providers into the Sunnyslope system so that their customers can receive safe, reliable water that meets state water quality regulations. The pending annexations are supported by grant funding from the Urban Community Drought Relief Program, a state initiative to help communities that have failing wells and associated problems with high saline and arsenic levels.

“The annexations will bring in new customers from existing neighborhoods

without any cost to our current ratepayers, and without encouraging new development in the area,” said Sunnyslope General Manager Drew Lander. “It will provide safe water for nearby residents, help maintain property values, and keep water rates lower for all by bringing 300 new customers into the system—it’s a win-win for everyone.”

Sunnyslope Water will administrate a \$13.6 million grant to extend service to the Tres Pinos Water District and nearby Stonegate water system. In addition, Best Road Mutual Water Company, which serves the Heatherwood, Fox Hills Estates, and Fischer subdivisions has received a \$2.2 million grant to connect to our system. Design of the projects is underway with services slated to go online by 2026.

Storms ease drought *(Cont. from front page)*

Yet increased water storage alone is not enough to mitigate the drought effects brought about by the climate crisis, and the ongoing urban, agricultural, and industrial demand for water. Even successive seasons of high rainfall cannot recharge overdrafted groundwater basins or repair the great damage done to ecosystems, endangered wildlife, and fisheries. We have reached a point where our water supply cannot meet the demand of humans and the environment.

While the State of California is exploring strategies for more recycling, desalting, and expanded water storage capacity, conservation remains the key to ensuring our future water supply. The State Water Board is working on a new “Making Conservation a California Way of Life” project which will update conservation goals for all urban retail water suppliers, including Sunnyslope Water. As a community, we have done a good job of meeting conservation guidelines during the drought. We encourage everyone to continue conserving water to help ensure the welfare of our community.

You ask;
we answer!



“Is all the new development raising my water bills?”

On the contrary—new customers help keep fees lower because more people are sharing the cost. New hookup fees have brought in approximately \$18 million in the last seven years, which has been used to pay for the construction of the Lessalt and West Hills treatment plants. Without that income, we would have had to raise water rates several years ago to meet fiscal responsibilities.

As of July 1, 2022, we have increased our new connection fees by 15 percent, from \$12,405 to \$13,800, to keep up with the Bay Area inflation index. Hookup fees for new homes are a buy-in cost to use existing infrastructure—developers must still pay for all the new infrastructure that is connected to the Sunnyslope system: water pipes, hydrants, valves, meter boxes, and main lines.

Sunnyslope Water does not control the number of homes built within the community. As a nonprofit special district, it is our responsibility to plan for regional growth predictions as detailed in the City of Hollister and San Benito County general plans. We implement guidelines in the Hollister Urban Area Water Management Plan to ensure that we maintain high-quality service for existing customers, as well as new residents.

Sunnyslope actively participates in the development plan review process to ensure that policies are in the best interest of ratepayers. Our engineers make changes and additions when necessary to protect and improve our existing water system and ensure compliance with CALGreen plumbing codes and the state’s Model Water Efficient Landscape Ordinance.

Have a question about your water service? Please email us at billing@sunnyslopewater.org, or call (831) 637-4670—your question may appear in our newsletter!



Your vote is changing:

We need your input to ensure fair board elections!

Please visit sunnyslopedwater.org to answer our quick and easy 5-question voter's poll

Your voice matters!

Why is the voting system changing?

Like the vast majority of special districts and cities, Sunnyslope Water District has maintained at-large, open elections for its board members. When the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) passed in 2001 it altered the federal Voting Rights Act, making it easier for plaintiffs to legally challenge at-large voting systems in California. Under the CVRA, plaintiffs merely need to declare that racially polarized voting may exist to prevail in a lawsuit; they do not have to prove that minority populations are unable to elect their preferred candidates. As a result, on February 17, 2023 Sunnyslope received a demand letter from the Shenkman & Hughes law firm in Malibu alleging that Sunnyslope's election system violates the CVRA because it dilutes the impact of Latino voters.

While the overwhelming majority of special districts do not violate voting rights, to date no defendant has ever successfully litigated against a CVRA lawsuit due to the legislation's relaxed burden of proof. Losing agencies must pay all legal and court fees of the plaintiffs, and previous settlements have reached into the millions of dollars for some cities. As a result, the vast majority of school, hospital, fire, airport, and water districts threatened with litigation have voluntarily shouldered the cost of changing their election system to avoid the much larger cost of legal defense and liability for attorney fees. While meant to protect civil rights in racially polarized areas, the CVRA has inadvertently created a kind of cottage industry with attorneys initiating CVRA claims and recovering fees via settlements before cases are heard in court. While efforts are being made to amend CVRA language, this does not help current litigants.

How is my vote changing?

With current at-large elections, all Sunnyslope customers can vote for as many candidates as there are vacant council seats. To institute by-district elections, Sunnyslope must divide its customer service area into five voting districts, one for each board member seat, and customers will only be able to vote for the candidate who lives in their electoral district. If nobody runs for election in a given voting section the Sunnyslope Board of Directors will appoint a representative. If current board members live in the same trustee area they will have to run against each other.

How will the change take place?

To fulfill CVRA requirements and protect Sunnyslope customers from shouldering potentially costly litigation, Sunnyslope is hiring a demographer to coordinate the election transition. Over the next year we will publish a draft map of proposed voting areas and hold a minimum of four public hearings, among other requirements.

We need your input to make voting as equitable as possible

Establishing voting districts is challenging for small agencies like Sunnyslope Water which have a well-integrated population base. We need to know your concerns and preferences to ensure equitable voting boundaries. Please visit sunnyslopedwater.org to answer our short five-question poll, and plan to attend our public meetings, to be announced. If you have questions, please email us at elections@sunnyslopedwater.org.



Under the new system, Sunnyslope customers will only vote for the one board member who lives in their geographic trustee area, instead of voting for all five members of the board.



Get paid to replace your lawn!

Don't miss out! To date, the Water Resources Association San Benito County (WRASBC) has awarded \$195,000 in rebates to homeowners who have replaced their water-intensive lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping. With new grant funding on the way, you can still take advantage of this popular turf replacement program. Residents can convert from 100 to 1,000 square feet of irrigated lawn and receive a two dollar per square foot rebate (\$200-\$2,000).

To get started, please contact Program Manager Shawn Novack at 831-637-4378 or snovack@sbcwd.com to schedule an inspection. A representative will visit your yard to see if it qualifies for a rebate. You can also visit wrasbc.org for details and application form, as well as free, downloadable garden plans featuring native and drought-tolerant plants.

Get ready for summer Save money with a free irrigation checkup

Call WRASBC at 831-637-4378 to schedule a visit to your property. A friendly representative will provide all these services free of charge:

Set your irrigation controller for maximum efficiency to support a healthy landscape
Check layout and sprinkler head spacing for overall efficiency

Schedule optimal water cycling based on your soil type, plant varieties, elevation changes, and shade coverage

Check your system for leaks, broken valves, mismatched sprinkler heads, etc.

Provide free hose nozzles and advice on saving water, including a 50 percent rebate (up to \$100) on rain sensors, rotating sprinkler heads, and hose timers.

