

# THE MAIN CANAL

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The Merced River begins its journey in the Sierra above Yosemite Valley

## Staying Focused and Moving Forward

Despite the tough sledding that nearly every organization and business throughout California and the rest of the nation is experiencing, the Merced Irrigation District continues to move forward. It has been a trying period for the District also. The lack of significant rain the last few months, coupled with three years of consecutive dry seasons, have impacted the District and growers alike. On page 2 of this edition of The Main Canal, Assistant General Manager, Water Resources, Ted Selb reviews the coming irrigation season and what growers can expect.



From the  
**General  
Manager's  
Desk**  
by Ross Rogers

The District's Board of Directors has adopted an operating and capital budget for 2003 of approximately \$10 million for water utility. As part of the budget process, the District reviewed its rate structures and determined it would have to raise water rates by approximately 5% in 2003 to continue providing the level of quality service its water users have come to expect.

The small increase is the first time the Board has changed the rate in nearly a decade, which has seen general inflation increase expenses in the economy by about 26%.

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## Water Deliveries Begin Ahead of Schedule

At its March 4, 2003, meeting, the District Board of Directors voted unanimously to authorize the General Manager to begin the 2003 irrigation season on March 10, 2003, two weeks ahead of schedule.

After three consecutive dry years in the Merced River watershed, Lake McClure had a storage of only 367,000 acre feet as of the end of February 2003 – 68% of average and only 36% of capacity. This low lake level has not been seen since 1992, when only 2 acre-feet per acre of water was available for in-District growers.

After above average precipitation in November and December 2002, due primarily to the much-publicized El Niño weather phenomenon, January and February 2003 precipitation dried up with only 35% of average. The first two months of the year are normally big snow producers in the watershed. Snow water content is about 70% of the April 1 average.

Long-range forecasts for the remainder of the winter/spring 2003 vary widely depending on which meteorologist you ask. The National Weather Service long-range weather outlook calls for a slightly better than 50-50 chance of above normal precipitation for March. Other weather prognosticators are calling for below average conditions for the remainder of the rainy season with a fast-waning El Niño.

### Supply Forecasts for District Growers

What does all this mean for water supply in 2003 for growers? There's good news and bad news. The bad news: No "surplus and saleable" water will be made available to approximately 100 growers over 10,000 acres located outside, but adjacent to, the District's boundary. The District's surface water replaces groundwater



Three dry years have left Lake McClure at its lowest level since 1992

that would have been pumped from deep water groundwater wells. This practice, known as "in-lieu groundwater recharge," has been successful in maintaining a healthy groundwater supply within the District.

### Capital Improvement Projects Pay Off

The good news: surface water deliveries to growers inside the District will not be curtailed, due primarily to the \$12 million in capital improvement and water conservation projects constructed since 1993. As a result of these projects, system efficiencies and the level of service have greatly improved, with significant reduction in operational discharges, netting more water in Lake McClure.

At the same time, on-farm efficiencies have improved thanks, in part, to the District's continuing on-farm water conservation incentive programs. Most recently, the average crop water application was just under 3 acre-feet per acre.

Based on the March 4 Board action, irrigation water was available in all areas of the

District on Friday, March 14. Water orders began at 8 a.m. March 10, 2003. Water Applications and Owner/Tenant Agreements (if applicable) must be completed and returned to the District office at 744 W. 20th Street to begin water service.

**For more information, please call the Irrigation Operations water order office at (209) 722-2720. Growers in Livingston/Snelling areas can call toll-free at (800) 750-2720. During the irrigation season, water orders will be taken 24 hours per day, seven days per week.**

**THINK SNOW! THINK SPRING STORMS!**

# Merced I.D.'s Outstanding Employee & Supervisors!

*Each year, one employee and one supervisor are recognized for their outstanding achievements, job performance and contributions to the District over the past year. The 2002 Supervisor of the Year recognition was unique in that the four Senior Distribution System Operators (SDSOs) were selected as a group to share in the honors.*



## **EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR 2002** **DEBBIE BENJAMIN**

Debbie was completely surprised when it was announced at the holiday luncheon that she was the District's Employee of the Year. "I had no clue!" she said. At the award ceremony, Debbie was lauded for doing an "excellent job"

and for helping "make the District a great place to work." Hired in 1974 as a cashier/clerk in the tax department, Debbie worked downtown in the finance department for 28 years. She recently started in the newly created position of Secretary at Franklin Yard where she does "a little bit of everything" and "likes everything about her job." Known for her professional, cheerful attitude, Debbie manages to please not one, but two bosses – Leon Foster and Bob Treanor. She has lived in the Merced area all of her life. For fun, she and her husband enjoy taking their boat out and cruising with friends on the Delta.



## **SUPERVISOR OF THE YEAR** **2002 SENIOR DISTRIBUTION** **SYSTEM OPERATORS (SDSO)** **EDWARD BALDES**

Edward was born in the Azores Islands, located off Portugal, and moved to Merced in 1971 after a stint in the military service. He

was hired by the District on September 9, 1985, as a Utility I worker in construction. About nine months later, he became a ditchtender and held that job for five years. Edward became a SDSO in 1991 and currently handles the Le Grand distribution area, which also covers Planada and south Merced. He supervises six others and said he likes his job because he "likes to deal with people." Edward has two daughters, 28 and 24, and one son, 27. He enjoys spending time in Monterey and Pismo Beach.



## **STEW SORENSEN**

Stew started with the District May 15, 1979, as a ditchtender. He now supervises four DSOs and two nighttime employees in the Fairfield area,

which includes the National Wildlife Refuge. Stew said he likes running water and working with irrigators "to keep them all capably supplied. My job is to make sure my DSOs have enough water," he said. "It's never the same day-to-day because water never runs the same way two days in a row." A father of three grown children, Stew and his wife have been undertaking a major home remodeling for the past two years. He is active in the District Foundation, which gives to charitable causes and promotes ag education, and he gives talks on water safety at area schools.



## **ANDY WEATHERS**

Andy was hired on April 1, 1978, as a ditchtender and became a Senior Distribution System Operator following the reorganization of the

distribution system in 1991. He manages the Livingston area where he supervises eight employees. "It's a challenge and it's something new every day," he said. Andy was born and raised in the small farming community of Ballico and now lives in the heart of the region in Atwater. In his free time, Andy used to hunt and fish but doesn't have much time for that now. But that's all right with him. "I plan to stay right where I am," he said. "I really like my job."



## **JERRY WOOD**

On June 7, Jerry will celebrate his 33rd year with the District. He also began his career as a ditchtender and worked for close to 20

years in different parts of the District. He was promoted 12 years ago and said it was "kind of a challenge taking a SDSO job. I was used to a tape measure and a stick." But he proved to be a quick study on the computer and now uses one at home, too. Jerry supervises six employees and takes care of the Escaladian area. As someone who enjoys the outdoors, he likes the fact that his job keeps him out in the field. Jerry has four adult children and spends a lot of time with his two grandchildren. Another favorite pastime is fishing for bass or trout at Lake McClure.

## **2002 RETIREE**



## **TONY SALADO**

Chemical Technician Applicator  
Hired January 2, 1969  
Retirement October 8, 2002

Tony was hired in 1969 as a Night Patrolman and then assumed a position as Utilityman in the weed control department shortly after. He worked his way up in the department and retired as a Chemical Technician Applicator retiring in October of 2002.

# Agricultural Waste Discharge Waiver Extended

Central Valley farmers, including those within the Merced I.D., have enjoyed a 20-year-old waiver from waste discharge requirements for irrigation return water and storm water runoff from irrigated lands. The waiver expired Dec. 31, 2002, due to a change in the Water Code.

The new code required the sunset of all existing waivers by January 1, 2003, limiting any future waivers to a maximum of five years and imposed enforceable conditions on renewed waivers.

The renewal of the agricultural waste discharge waiver was opposed by Baykeeper/Deltakeeper, Earth Justice and others, in a petition to the Regional Water Quality Control Board-Region No. 5 (Regional Board). The petitioners also filed a lawsuit in February 2002.

## New Waiver Approved

However, an alternative proposed by the agricultural community was approved by the Regional Board on December 5, 2002, and a two-year extension of the "Conditional Waiver of Waste Discharge Requirements for Discharges from Irrigated Lands" was granted. The new waiver calls for:

- The establishment of water quality monitoring of discharges from irrigated lands.
- The creation of watershed groups to coordinate efforts in the development.
- Implementation of best management practices for agricultural drainage.
- The implementation of water quality monitoring.

## Important Deadlines

No later than July 2004, growers that generate discharges from irrigated lands must notify the Regional Board directly, or through a watershed group, of their intent to operate under the terms of the waiver. Another option for growers is they must submit a report of waste discharge by Aug. 1, 2004, or file a notice of intent to comply with general waste discharge requirements (if such an order is adopted).

## What Does This Mean to District Growers?

Growers who discharge tail water into any public drains, canals, or natural streams are subject to the waiver. The conditions on the new waivers are: prevention of toxicity and the control of sediments to meet turbidity objectives.

The Merced I.D. and sister agencies in the San Joaquin River Group Authority are following the progress of the new waiver and coordinating efforts to meet its conditions. Stay tuned to The Main Canal for additional information and development on this important issue.



A grower irrigates almonds, one of 25 types of crops grown in the District.

## In Memoriam



### RICHARD B. PARKER

May 5, 1912 – Jan. 7, 2003

Dick Parker, a longtime Le Grand area farmer, was first appointed to the Board of Directors of the Merced Irrigation District on July 14, 1964, by the Merced County Board of Supervisors to fill

the unexpired term of Division 1 Director Milton Reiman. He faithfully served the District until December 29, 1989, including eight years as board president. The District honored Mr. Parker's service with the dedication of the Parker Power Plant in 1982.

Mr. Parker was a 1936 graduate of Arizona State University with degrees in education and agriculture. In 1941 he earned a degree in agronomy from the University of Arizona, Tucson. Mr. Parker farmed in the Le Grand area for over 40 years with his brother Jim.



### ARTHUR L. WILLIAMS (LEE)

March 29, 1941 – December 7, 2002

Lee Williams was employed by the District on May 26, 1970, as a ditchtender and served in that capacity until 1978 when he became a heavy equipment operator. He served the District

until his death. Lee earned the respect of all the District employees who knew him. He was a tireless worker and mentor, setting an outstanding example for our younger employees. For those reasons, along with his outstanding work ethic, Lee was selected as Employee of the Year for 1999. Lee was a husband, father and grandfather. He will be greatly missed by all who were fortunate enough to know him.

# What You Can't See Helps Communities

## *Underground electric service & increased reliability*

**E**lectric utilities traditionally use overhead lines to deliver most of their power to homes and businesses. As a "new" electric utility, the Merced I.D. has agreed to provide the majority of its electric service within the urban areas from underground distribution facilities.

Within the city boundaries of Atwater, Livingston and Merced, the District's Electric Services buries its lines along roadways and streets to deliver service to new residential and commercial developments. To date, the District has installed about 25 miles of underground service throughout its urban service areas in Eastern Merced County.



Installing underground electric lines.

While the costs for underground service are about twice that of traditional overhead service, there are advantages to the buried lines.

- Increased electric reliability. Less risk from typical above-ground hazards such as auto accidents or storm damage increases reliability. Reliability is a key service feature when customers choose an electric provider. The District's underground service will be an important advantage for us as we grow.
- Lower maintenance costs. The District expects overall maintenance costs to be less for the buried service than for comparable overhead lines. With reduced hazard exposure, these reduced costs should help recover some of the higher installation cost over time. And, less maintenance downtime translates to improved reliability.

- Better for communities. Underground facilities are more pleasing to the customers' eyes than the unsightly cables of overhead facilities. Esthetically, underground facilities are better for communities and serve to make the District the "stealth" utility of the urban environment.

### **Call Before You Dig**

Since underground facilities are not visible, please call the USA Alert notification system before you dig to protect yourself and the utility.

**Visit the District's  
website:  
[www.mercedid.org](http://www.mercedid.org)**

## **Staying Focused**

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As Board President Jack Hooper recently told the press, "We are proud of the fact that we were able to hold rates where they were for nine years. Nobody likes to raise rates, even one this small at just 5%, but our costs and maintenance continue to rise. Most growers we've talked to understand and know it's part of the cost of doing business."

The District's current Business Plan had called for a water rate increase of approximately 10% in 2001, which was avoided, and an additional approximately 10% increase in 2004.

The 2003 Budget has earmarked about \$1.3 million for improvements to the District's water delivery system and its water conservation projects. These expenditures will continue to improve the District's quality of service, our top priority. They will also improve the District's water use efficiency, necessary to continue our successful defense of the District's water rights and uses.

Electric Services continues to expand in the community and that growth has resulted in an expected increase in revenue to \$32.5 million. To maintain the current pace of its distribution

system growth, Electric Services recently issued \$15 million in Certificates of Participation in early 2003. The issue will be repaid entirely from electric system revenues.

With the irrigation season just now underway, we are optimistic that if we keep focused on providing the best service, and with a little help from Mother Nature, this will be a good year for the District and our grower-members alike.

## District Board of Directors

TOM RETA (Secretary) Division 1  
TIM PELLISSIER Division 2  
JACK HOOPER (President) Division 3  
STAN MORIMOTO Division 4  
BILLY PIMENTEL (Vice-Pres.) Division 5

## District Staff At Your Service

ROSS ROGERS  
General Manager & CEO

TED SELB  
Assistant General Manager,  
Water Resources

GARITH KRAUSE  
Assistant General Manager,  
Energy Resources

BOB BLUM  
Director of Administrative Services

BOB ACKER  
Director of Facilities and Planning

JEFF BIXBY  
Director of Finance

MIKE BERMINGHAM  
Parks Manager

BOBBY MOONEYHAM  
Hydroelectric Project Manager

STEVE DUNN  
Manager of Engineering & Operations  
Electric Services

JEM BROWN  
Manager of Business Development  
Electric Services

HICHAM ELTAL  
Manager of Engineering Water Resources

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# Work Begins on Facilities Replacement

The Facilities Improvement Fund implemented in 2003 will provide money for the long overdue replacement of non-repairable facilities on a long list of backlogged maintenance projects.

Some of the projects include the replacement of old leaking, broken pipelines and siphon crossings under state highways and county roads. Other projects include overlaying of some leaking and disintegrating concrete-lined canals.

The \$1,662,000 placed in the Facilities Improvement Fund is committed for future year projects with \$662,000 from the fund earmarked for projects in 2003. The funding will only help with the tip of the facilities maintenance iceberg. Many of the pipelines and concrete-lined canals that comprise the District's distribution system date back to the 1930s. The replacement of failing facilities has been limited over the years.

Utilizing the fund, work began in February on projects authorized by the Board of Directors.

Projects completed in February and March included the replacement of 1485 feet of 36-inch concrete pipeline on the Planisburg Lateral, a siphon crossing on the Grimes Lateral at Olive Avenue and a siphon crossing on the Farmdale Lateral at Mission Avenue. Several other projects will be completed in the next month, working around the irrigation water in the canal system.

Pre-approved funding for maintenance/replacement projects in advance of next year's budget will allow work on these projects to begin right after the end of the irrigation season, in November, rather than being delayed until the following year's budget is approved in January.

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