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RMWD EYES CHANGES AS IT MARKS 60TH ANNIVERSARY

Rainbow Municipal Water District is on the cusp of change as its customers and leaders prepare to mark its 60th anniversary later this year.

As our board takes steps to join with its closest geographical counterpart, the Fallbrook Public Utility District, we thought it would be helpful to examine the history of the agency that waters our groves and provides water to our homes.

The area served by RMWD, like much of Riverside and San Diego counties, can trace its inhabited origin to small bands of indigenous people who made their camps overlooking local streams and rivers. Today those watercourses are known as the Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers and Murrieta, Temecula, Pechanga, Rainbow and Alder creeks.

Spanish pioneers began settling the Temecula Valley in 1797 and established Mission San Luis Rey in what is now Oceanside. California eventually passed from Spain to Mexico, and became a U.S. territory after the Mexican War of 1846. California was granted statehood in 1850.

Due to scarce water supplies, the region's settlers used the area principally for the dry farming of grain and hay. A few attempts were made to plant groves that used local wells or stream beds, but these attempts were scattered and relatively unsuccessful.

Located downstream from Temecula on the Santa Margarita River, Fallbrook received its name from the pioneering Reche brothers in the 1870s. The verdant area with its unique microclimate soon became known for its hunting, fruit trees, alfalfa fields, honey and homesteaders.

In 1929, the San Luis Rey Heights area was subdivided by a rancher, Edwin G. Hart, who planted about 20 acres of avocados. That development plan folded, but it was revived when the San Luis Rey Heights Mutual Water Company was formed in 1945 with a private 12-inch diameter line that ran nine miles from the Rainbow Gap area to supply the grove.

By 1953, there was a mushrooming thirst for water throughout the area as the output of local springs, wells, streams declined. Increasing demand for stable water supplies prompted the formation of Rainbow, and its newly-seated governing board met for the first time in December 1953.

At that time, the district's service area totaled about 36,500 acres. The early actions of Rainbow's fledgling governing board included annexing to the San Diego County Water Authority and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. Those two wholesale water agencies together provide Rainbow with the imported supplies that continue to serve its homes, schools, stores, groves, nurseries and a wide range of other agricultural and commercial customers.

A series of annexations and mergers – including taking over the San Luis Rey Mutual Water Company in 1970 – have boosted Rainbow's size over the years to nearly 50,000 acres today. That allowed Rainbow to increase the percentage of its agricultural water supply and serve a larger, more diverse area. But the rapid expansion exposed some underlying weaknesses.

As a result, many of Rainbow's sewer and water pipes, tanks and reservoirs are aging and mismatched today. Newly-developed parts of the district feature modern infrastructure whereas older areas require more frequent repairs, pipe replacements and other maintenance.

Development and growth pressures also impacted the district's political landscape. Resident disagreement over growth policies sparked several board member recall elections and a high rate of administrative turnover was cited by a county boundary-setting agency in an October 2006 services report.

That report – which was prepared for the San Diego County Local Agency Formation Commission -- listed seven retirements, 30 resignations and nine terminations over a five-year period. Capping that tumultuous political period in the district's history, a proposed bond measure aimed at upgrading many of the district's aging facilities was defeated by voters at the polls.

And, like many other water districts that were intended to primarily serve agricultural areas, the state Department of Health Services in August 2005 directed Rainbow to cover its water storage reservoirs that were open to the elements. Rainbow relies on a Metropolitan Water District facility at Lake Skinner to treat its domestic and agricultural supplies.

In order to ease simmering political discord and involve more customers in district policies and issues, Rainbow's governing board in mid-2007 approved the creation of three volunteer committees. Those committees advise the board on engineering, communications and budget and finance issues.

Since then, Rainbow customers, staff members and appointed and elected representatives have fostered a greater sense of teamwork and deeper understanding of the service and supply issues that the district faces. Major improvements have been made in the district's infrastructure and all the open reservoirs have been covered, converted to enclosed tanks or taken out of service.

And now, Rainbow leaders are moving forward with a mutual linkage to FPUD, a move that is expected to save scarce revenues and eliminate duplication of services. A Joint Powers Authority is currently being studied has been implemented as the first step in what could eventually become a consolidation of the two agencies.

[Information compiled from: LSA Associates, *Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence Update: Municipal Water Districts within the Bonsall and Pala Hydrologic Sub Area*; "Highlights of RMWD History," *Rainbow Municipal Water District Annual Report 1971*; *Temecula History: A Chronology 1797-1993*, www.oldtemecula.com.]