Is Orange County Prepared for the Next Drought? Yes.

You may have heard about the California drought in recent news and headlines. On April 21, Governor Newsom issued a State of Emergency Proclamation stating that California is in a second consecutive year of dry conditions, resulting in drought or near-drought throughout many portions of the State. Most recently on May 11, Governor Newsom expanded on the April drought announcement which now includes 41 total counties under the drought state of emergency. While this number may seem high, keep in mind this represents only 30% of the state's population.

A statewide drought has not yet been declared and, so far, Southern California counties are not under the drought state of emergency. Recurring drought is a feature of California's climate and rest assured that Orange County water agencies plan and prepare for this.

For decades, water agencies have carefully planned and invested in long-term solutions to ensure that Orange County residents and businesses have enough water for their everyday needs – drought or no drought. I would like to share a few examples of the Orange County Water District's (OCWD; the District) efforts to secure a reliable supply of water for the 2.5 million people we serve.

Effectively Managing the Orange County Groundwater Basin: As part of its groundwater management program, OCWD maintains one of the world's most advanced aquifer recharge systems to store water that is pumped from wells belonging to local water agencies, cities and other groundwater users. The Basin holds enough water to provide 77% of the drinking water for the following cities and water agencies within the OCWD service area, who then supply it to their customers: Anaheim, Buena Park, East Orange County Water District, Fountain Valley, Fullerton, Garden Grove, Golden State Water Company, Huntington Beach, Irvine Ranch Water District, La Palma, Mesa Water District, Newport Beach, Orange, Santa Ana, Seal Beach, Serrano Water District, Tustin, Westminster, and Yorba Linda Water District. Through appropriate management, OCWD has successfully increased the yield of the Basin over time.

Increasing Stormwater Capture at Prado Basin: In April 2021, following approvals by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the Prado Basin Ecosystem Restoration and Water Conservation Feasibility Study, OCWD began planning for increased water storage behind Prado Dam in Riverside County. This project will increase long-term water supply reliability by adding an additional 6,000 to 12,000 acre-feet of water annually into the Orange County Groundwater Basin—creating a new water supply for approximately 60,000 people per year.

Stormwater captured at Prado Dam is recharged into the Orange County Groundwater Basin and becomes part of OCWD's drinking water supply.

Expanding Water Recycling: The Groundwater Replenishment System (GWRS), which creates highly purified drinking water out of wastewater, recently achieved an incredible milestone – 1 million acre-feet, or more than 326 billion gallons of water, have been produced at this facility since 2008. The GWRS is currently undergoing an expansion that, when complete in 2023, will produce 130 million gallons of water a day – enough water to serve one million people daily. In comparison, the first one million acre-feet of ultra-pure water took more than 13 years to produce. At full capacity, (130 million gallons per day) it will take slightly more than 7 years to produce the next 1 million acre-feet of water. An impressive increase in production, don't you agree? All of this "new" water gets recharged into the Orange County Groundwater Basin, providing additional drinking water supply, further enhancing water reliability for our region.

These are just a few of the projects we are working on and we're not stopping here. As part of OCWD's commitment to provide a reliable and sustainable water supply to Orange County, we are exploring ocean desalination as a way to increase local water supplies. This new source of clean water would reduce the region's dependence on imported water sources from Northern California and the Colorado River that are vulnerable to drought, natural disasters, environmental concerns, and regulatory restrictions. We're also researching innovative technology and evaluating new processes to not only expand water supply, but to maintain and protect the quality of water so it continues to meet or exceed state and federal water quality standards.

As California faces fluctuating weather patterns that challenge our water reliability, OCWD is committed to responsible and cost-effective planning to increase the security of our local water supplies. So, while reports about the drought may be making headlines, rest assured, if severe dry conditions occur in Southern California and Orange County, the City of Fullerton and OCWD are already hard at work to ensure there is enough water supply for your everyday needs.

I encourage you to learn more about our water supply by visiting www.ocwd.com and Fullerton's water service web page.

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