Four for the Fortieth

It’s official — the Bay Area Monitor is 40 years old.

We reached that milestone in May. Leading up to this landmark anniversary, we’ve run a series of articles chronicling the publication’s history, starting with its launch to address issues related to the federal Clean Air Act of 1970. Series author Leslie Stewart traced the Monitor’s evolution through the decades, describing how its coverage of planning and policy developed to match the Bay Area’s own remarkable growth. Her last installment recounted events through 2005, just short of when the region began to grapple with two unprecedented challenges.

The first was climate change. With the passage of the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, California committed to significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Also known by its less majestic legislative title, Assembly Bill 32, this law has held widespread ramifications for stakeholders across the state. Numerous Monitor articles from the past decade have underscored the statute’s role in the fight against climate change, and countless more have touched on attendant strategies for confronting one of the most serious problems of our time.

The second challenge received much less attention within the pages of the Monitor, but behind the scenes, it has been a subject of concern. The Great Recession brought financial hardship to the Bay Area and beyond, crippling various sectors of the economy, and print media in particular.

The Monitor survived those lean times, but for it to remain viable in the uncertain future will require innovation. So, thanks to the great generosity of our donors, we have taken new strides — printing in full color, redesigning our website, doubling our online readership, launching a Facebook page, and recruiting a Water Education Initiative Reporting Fellow.

This last effort has proven so worthwhile that we have decided to expand the initiative for the coming year, assembling a team of four talented journalists, each assigned to a designated topic area (see sidebar). Focusing on a specific reporting beat should empower them to provide more substantive, detailed coverage of the region, while also furnishing them with greater professional stability. Each team member has contributed an article to this edition, but the initiative formally starts in August with the publication of the first edition of Volume 41. We hope readers will enjoy this next step in the Monitor’s evolution.
Reckoning with Responsibility in Dry Times: A Personal Water Story

By Robin Meadows

Ten years ago, I received a letter from the City of Fairfield notifying me of an unwelcome distinction: my household was one of the biggest water users in town — a “Top Ten Percenter,” the letter said — at 1,291 gallons a day. The letter included a bar graph that shouted my extravagance, but came with a handwritten note that was unexpectedly kind. After stating that a family of four like mine typically uses 400 gallons a day indoors, the writer nonetheless tried to make me feel better by saying our use was “fairly normal, especially considering the summer’s unusually high temperatures and the fact that grass requires a lot of water.” The letter ended with an invitation to call or drop by for water saving tips.

I was mortified.

I was also surprised. As I explained when I called, the lawn was one of the first things to go when we moved in. The city said the real culprit was probably an underground leak, and sent a technician out to check. He showed me that the needle on my water meter whirled even when I wasn’t using any water, confirming the leak. And the meter still spun after he turned off the water supply to my house, showing the leak was on the city’s side of the pipes.

The city repaired the pipe, my water use dropped, and I stopped thinking about it. I was sure I had no reason to worry: while Californians generally consume half of their water outside, I don’t have a lawn, don’t wash my car in the driveway, and don’t have a pool. I was so confident my water use was low that I still wasn’t paying attention to it three years into California’s extreme drought, and nearly a year into my water reporting fellowship with the Bay Area Monitor.

I’m paying attention now. After a fourth dry winter in a row, the hills edging the valley where I live are already brown, buckeye trees already have yellow leaves even though they’re still blooming, and local farmers have already baled their first crop of hay. Worse, the Sierra Nevada snowpack that provides two-thirds of California’s water is down to almost nothing.

Last year, the state asked people in cities to use 20 percent less water. But we didn’t listen. So for the first time ever, California has mandated urban water restrictions. The state says cities must collectively use 25 percent less water in 2015 than they did in 2013, and each city has a customized target ranging from 8 to 36 percent less. The target depends solely on how much water the city used last year, which varied enormously from 41 gallons per person per day in South San Francisco to 614 gallons per person per day in the Palm Desert region of Southern California. It doesn’t matter how much water a city has or how much they have already conserved, and some object to this approach.

Scrambling for Water

Suburban cities in hot parts of the state will struggle most to meet their conservation targets. Take San Jose, where people used an average of 96 gallons of water a day last year. The state says they must conserve water by 20 percent this year, and one of their water suppliers, the Santa Clara Valley Water District (SCVWWD), wants its customers to go...
even further and conserve 30 percent. SCVWD gets most of its supply from state and federal projects that deliver water from the Sierras via the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Dana Jacobson, who works on water deals for SCVWD, said this year(232,914),(763,929)'s allocations are so low that the district has only 18 billion gallons, just a third of its normal supply.

Now SCVWD is scrambling for water to get it through the dry summer. "People who typically have water to sell don't this year," Jacobson said. As of late spring, a handful of deals were in the works but SCVWD was only sure of getting an additional 1.6 billion gallons. That won't last long — Jacobson estimated it's only enough drinking water for a couple of weeks in the summer.

Conservation Superstars

The Dublin San Ramon Services District (DSRSD) also serves a hot suburban area. But people there saved even more water than necessary last year. "The bad news was that we had to — the state gave us zero percent of our water allocation until September, and then we only got 5 percent," said district spokesperson Sue Stephenson. Most of the district's supply comes from the State Water Project, which cut deliveries to almost nothing in 2014. "The good news is that people stepped up and did what we asked," she added. DSRSD imposed a mandatory 25 percent reduction in water use in 2014 and its customers did even better, conserving 29 percent.

Under the new state mandate, the district has to save only 16 percent in 2015. "We might not have to be as tough on people as last year," said DSRSD operations manager Dan Gallagher. How tough were they? Restrictions included bans on washing cars and hosing off driveways, and on watering yards during the winter and between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. the rest of the year. Violators faced fines up to $1,000. And the heaviest water users paid nearly eight times the baseline rate.

DSRSD also helped its customers conserve by retrofitting water meters with radio transmitters that let people track their water use in real time. "They're aware how much it takes for the shower, washing machine, and lawn," Stephenson said. Lawns in the DSRSD service area were brown last summer, and early this year, per-person use was down to 44 gallons a day.

Learning how much people in Dublin and San Ramon have conserved made me question my own habits. I haven't been using much water outside, but inside is a totally different story — I love baths. And I never really considered how much water it takes to fill a bathtub, even though you can tell it's a lot just from their size and the time it takes to fill them. So I checked with the Environmental Protection Agency and learned an inconvenient (to me) truth: the average tub holds 36 gallons. That's uncomfortably close to a whole day's use in Dublin and San Ramon.

Water Surplus

Even so, I thought, do I really have to use less water? I'd heard that Fairfield was water rich when we moved here, and a few years ago I read in my local newspaper, the Daily Republic, that the city had secured even more water rights.

But all I really knew about my water was that most of it comes from Lake Berryessa, which is 30 miles north of me in Napa County. So I called the Solano County Water Agency, which provides Fairfield's water, and spoke with engineer Thomas Pate. "We're in better shape than most folks," he told me. What a colossal understatement.

I was amazed to learn that Lake Berryessa is one of the biggest reservoirs in the state. At 500,000 billion gallons, Lake Berryessa is four times the size of San Francisco's Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, but supplies water to only two-fifths as many people. Of course it doesn't matter how big a reservoir is if it's empty, and from the news coverage you'd think all the reservoirs in California were down to cracked mud. It's true that many are worryingly low, especially in the Central Valley. One of the biggest reservoirs there, Exchequer Reservoir on the Merced River, can hold 330 billion gallons but was down to 37 billion gallons this spring. That's just 18 percent of its historical average.

But Lake Berryessa remains mind-bogglingly full. Pate put its current supply at about 325 billion gallons — 80 percent of the historical average — and said this is enough to meet the agency's water needs for the next five years.

Why is Lake Berryessa so full while reservoirs in the Central Valley are so low? The answer is a stubborn high-pressure ridge off the Pacific coast. For the past few years, Pate said, the ridge has deflected California's winter storms away from the Sierra Nevada and toward the 500-square-mile watershed in the Northern Coast Ranges that drains into Lake Berryessa. The big storm that drenched Northern California last winter "was pointed right at us," Pate said. "It's just the luck of the draw where the rain fell."

But no matter how much water any California city has this year, the state mandate means they still have to conserve. Fairfield must conserve 20 percent, and Vacaville, which also

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gets water from Lake Berryessa, must conserve 32 percent. Vacaville’s target is higher because it used almost twice as much water as Fairfield did last year: 200 versus 107 gallons per person each day.

According to my local newspaper, Vacaville utilities director Royce Cunningham wants to know why his city has to conserve so much when it has so much water. Libby Pischel, spokesperson for the Marin Municipal Water District, can tell him.

Like Lake Berryessa, Marin reservoirs are high this year — equal to the historical average in late April — and for the same reason. They also got lots of rain last winter. But people there still must conserve water by 20 percent this year. “It’s the prudent way to operate,” Pischel said. “We’re dependent on rainfall and we don’t know how much we’ll get from one year to the next.” The same goes for the cities Lake Berryessa supplies. If the drought persists and future rains no longer fall our way, we’ll be happy to have saved some of our water.

My conversation with Pischel made me wonder: was I doing my part to help my city reach its conservation goal? I hadn’t made any significant sacrifices. I don’t mind a little dust on my car, I’m not a big swimmer, and I garden with native plants for their beauty and ease of care, not just to save water. And I hadn’t even given up baths for short showers.

Worse, I’m not quite as pure about outdoor water use as I led you to believe. From the front, my yard looks like a model drought-friendly landscape, all oaks, manzanitas and sages that thrive with no summer water. But if you go around back, you’ll discover my not-so-little secret: I have a pond! I love the water tumbling down the streambed, the water lilies that are lush when everything else is parched, and the birds that come from miles around to drink and bathe.

The system is recirculating, so my pond is technically allowed even under California’s emergency water restrictions. But it’s still a big, deep body of water, it’s always full, and I top it off regularly during the summer. I don’t even want to think about how much water my pond holds — it dwarfs my bathtub — or how much it loses to evaporation.

My investigation made me question whether I could still enjoy my pond wholeheartedly. To find out, I needed to know how much water I actually use. While many cities in the Bay Area have smart water meters that track use in real time, mine doesn’t, so I called the Fairfield water department. The friendly woman who picked up couldn’t tell me how many gallons I use each day, but offered to send my water history by mail.

I could hardly stand the wait. I listened for the rumble of the mail carrier’s jeep every day, and the second it pulled away from my curb, I ran out to check for my water history. By the time it finally arrived, a decade after the one that labeled me a Top Ten Percenter, I was no longer confident that I was a responsible water user.

Do my dry habits like gardening with native plants make up for the wet ones like my pond? I opened the envelope — and phew! This time the bar graph showed that I use 89 gallons a day, below the average of 96 gallons a day it’ll take for Fairfield to reach its state mandated conservation target this year. All the same, I’m stepping up my own water conservation. Much as I enjoy baths, I don’t need one every day. Some may see California in drought as a story of water haves and have nots. But as one of the haves — at least for now — I say we’re all in this together.

Robin Meadows (www.robinmeadows.tumblr.com) is the reporting fellow for the 2014-15 Water Education Initiative. This article represents the last in a six-part series that she wrote for the reporting fellowship.

Created by the League of Women Voters of the Bay Area Education Fund to promote better understanding of regional water issues, the 2014-15 Water Education Initiative is underwritten by the Association of Bay Area Governments, Bay Area Biosolids to Energy, the East Bay Municipal Utility District, the League of Women Voters of Marin County, Louise Anderson, the Marin Municipal Water District, Marion Taylor, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, the Santa Clara Valley Water District, and the Sonoma County Water Agency.
Bay Area Open Space Council Commemorates a Quarter Century

By Elizabeth Devitt

More than 400 “outside voices” gathered inside the Craneway Pavilion in Richmond, on May 14, to participate in the 2015 Open Space Conference and celebrate the 25th anniversary of the event’s host, the Bay Area Open Space Council.

With a backdrop of the San Francisco Bay, access to the Bay Trail right outside the building, and a national historic park next door, the pavilion was an apt location for “a roomful of people who love using their outdoor voice,” noted Annie Burke, the council’s deputy director.

Although much has changed since the council first formed, the need to connect communities with open space still remains. “We need to continue our work to make sure that all the residents in the state can take advantage of the funding that we use to make lands better,” said Jenn Fox, outgoing executive director of the council.

With the conference slogan in mind — “Try. Learn. Repeat.” — natural space advocates took the stage to discuss ways to improve community engagement, funding, and partnerships, with the overarching goal to preserve and protect open space and working lands.

The first panel, with speakers that included Kaiser Permanente community benefit health manager Erica Browne and Richmond-based Pogo Park founder Toody Maher, focused on strategies to draw communities outdoors. One new community-building effort is called Outdoor Voice, an Open Space Council initiative to create a strong constituency for Bay Area parks and land conservation by signing up at least 10,000 subscribers before June 2016.

In addition to community support, open space preservation needs financial support.

Although Bay Area voters have been willing to pass local measures for green spaces, sources of national-level funding are dwindling, noted Robert Doyle, the general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District.

However, two new potential open space resources have been introduced to the California legislature this year. The meeting’s keynote speaker, Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de Leόn, spoke about the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Rivers, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2016 (Senate Bill 317) which would put a measure on next year’s ballot that, if passed by voters, would authorize the issuance of $2.45 billion in bonds to finance sustainable community projects, wildlife conservation, and create or expand safe neighborhood parks in underserved communities. In addition, Richmond-based Assemblymember Tony Thurmond introduced Assembly Bill 932, a bill that would allow the Department of Parks and Recreation to sponsor a specialized license plate program for helping to fund local park and recreation programs.

But money isn't all that matters; also important are the partnerships among the patchworked stewardships of open space areas. In the dry days to come, these collaborative efforts will need to more efficiently manage the water that these lands both require and sustain. “We need to turn ourselves into a 21st century state that manages water in a new way,” said Brian Stranko, director of the California Water Program for The Nature Conservancy.

The meeting concluded with an introduction of the incoming executive director of the Open Space Council, Deb Callahan, a seasoned environmental policy leader.

Elizabeth Devitt is a freelance science writer based in Santa Cruz.
Clip and Chip: An Alternative to Burning Agricultural Waste

By Leslie Stewart

Scenic vineyards offer relaxing outings in more rural parts of the Bay Area, while orchards supply farmers markets with fruit and offer families pick-your-own opportunities. Restaurants revel in the availability of local wines and produce for their tables. Sometimes, however, these amenities come with a helping of smoke — and not the kind from the barbecue grill — because the usual method for disposing prunings, old vines, and elderly trees is to scoop them into a pile and burn them, creating noxious billows that can blanket a valley or waft to neighboring areas.

Anyone who bemoans the demise of the fall bonfires after leaf-raking knows quite well that open burning is generally forbidden in the Bay Area, but there are exceptions. Among them are agricultural wastes from commercial vineyards and orchards, which may be burned during the year on designated “permissive burn days” when weather conditions promote adequate smoke dispersion and minimize potential ground-level air pollution impacts.

Not surprisingly, these agricultural waste fires create the same particulates that are a concern in fireplace smoke. Healdsburg winemaker and former environmental attorney Shelby Perkins has described the burning of vineyard prunings in the Napa Valley as a “net loss for the environment,” writing that the practice has damaged the health of residents and made wine production less sustainable.

Air quality regulators are also concerned. “State law prevents us from banning ‘ag burning,’” observed Doug Tolar, senior air quality specialist for the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, “but it allows us to restrict it.” May 1 marked the start of the annual prohibition period for agricultural waste fires in the Bay Area, but by late fall, with prior Air District notification, woody refuse can again be piled high and torched.

Qualifying agricultural waste fires are only allowed after filing a notification form with details about the planned burn and paying a $100 notification fee. Starting in January 2015, however, Air District staff gave burn notification filers an alternative: chipping their agricultural waste, on the agency’s dime. Even without other efforts to publicize the new chipping program, “word is going around,” according to Tolar, “and almost 50 different growers have used it.”

In its first four months, the program has gone through about two-thirds of the $150,000 allocated by the Air District for 2015, with an average usage of about $2,000 to $3,000 in free chipping services per job. Burn notifications typically drop off during the annual prohibition period, so the remainder of the funding will be used less rapidly, but Tolar expects it to be fully spent. Chipping is more expensive than burning, particularly the preparation, so the free program eases the switch.

Tolar’s tracking shows that most of the program usage has been pruning-related, and as a result, he noted, “the majority [has] been in the North Bay, which has the most of that type of burning” (although Wente Vineyards in Livermore is one of the larger growers participating). When growers elect to chip their prunings, refuse piles need to be carefully prepared for the safety of chipping crews. For crop replacement, where trees or vines are completely removed, safety becomes even trickier, because “pile setup has materials that can be problematic — wires, roots with rocks, that kind of thing.”

The Air District is looking into chipping equipment that can handle the more challenging materials as a possible way to expand the program.

Tolar’s hope is that the program “will serve as an example to those who are burning that there are alternatives, including mechanical ones such as chipping or shredding prunings.” In order to promote such alternatives, Napa Valley Grapegrowers, a wine industry coalition representing nearly 700 businesses across the county, has published a factsheet on vineyard prunings disposal that states, “Although there are valid reasons for considering burning grape prunings, the environmental
benefits of the other primary methods of disposing of grape
prunings should be given serious consideration.”

Ryan Decker, wine grower relations manager at Rodney
Strong Vineyards, affirmed that on their estates, “as standard
practice, all the annual prunings are returned in place to the
vineyards, although, for vineyard replacement, older vines
can have disease problems, so those are usually burned.”

Decker was aware of the Air District program, although he
was unsure if the winery’s vineyard management firm was
using it, and his remarks confirm that, as Tolar hopes, “Some
people are already doing it, willing to move toward alternatives
to burning, already moving in this new direction.”

Leslie Stewart is the most recent former editor of the Bay Area Monitor.

Region Readies for Transportation and Housing Plan Update

By Cecily O'Connor

Planning officials will soon weigh public input gathered
at spring open houses promoting Plan Bay Area 2040, the
update to the regional transportation and land-use roadmap
that's underway.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and
Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) will review a
summary of public comments at a June 12 joint committee
meeting, the first of several confabs to refine future growth
goals and targets.

An estimated 520 individuals collectively attended eight
open houses held in each county this spring, said Ellen
Griffin, MTC spokesperson. Numbers for the ninth open
house, scheduled in Marin County at the end of May, were
not available at press time. For those who couldn’t attend
meetings, a Plan Bay Area online forum was created to collect
additional comments during the month of May.

Attendees were asked to critique the seven goals and
targets laid out in the initial Plan Bay Area, adopted by MTC
and ABAG in July 2013. Those goals are: climate protection,
adequate housing, healthy and safe communities, open space
and agricultural preservation, equitable access, economic
vitality, and transportation system effectiveness. They could
talk about goals that align with their own priorities, or offer
new ideas altogether.

“So far we are seeing the strongest support for an effective
transportation system and adequate housing supply,” Griffin
said in an e-mail.

Deciding whether adequate housing, transit, and the other
current goals should be “modified” is one of the first actions
MTC and ABAG are expected to take this fall, Griffin said.

“Overall, the approach to the update “is to be limited and
strategic,” added MTC Planning Director Ken Kirkey. “Plan
Bay Area is a big undertaking, and many people and partners
put a lot of work into the first plan.”

In adherence to state legislation passed in 2008, Plan Bay
Area blends two regional plans: MTC’s transportation plan
and ABAG's housing plan. The legislation requires the Bay
Area and California’s 17 other metropolitan areas to have in
place strategies that accommodate future housing growth and
improve public transit, while cutting greenhouse gas emissions
from cars and light trucks. Plan Bay Area is updated every four

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years, with the next iteration slated for adoption in 2017.

No matter the timeframe, certain realities continue to pose challenges. One is the nearly 30 percent population jump expected over the next 25 years across the nine counties. This growth gives the Bay Area the distinction of California’s second-largest population and economic center, and drives home the need for decision makers to delve into housing affordability, transit modernization, agricultural land preservation, and sea level rise, among other hot issues, public advocates said.

Urban Habitat’s Bob Allen, director of the group’s policy and advocacy campaigns, cautioned that the region “can’t afford an update as usual” to Plan Bay Area. He cited climate change and housing displacement among struggling families as some of his key concerns.

Clarrissa Cabansagan, community planner at TransForm, said she was concerned about the potential for new developments to undermine smart growth goals.

“We can plan for growth around a transit station, but it matters who can and cannot afford to live there,” she said. “When we require each home near transit to still have two parking spots, that adds to the cost of housing and doesn’t encourage people to drive less.”

The current Plan Bay Area focuses almost 80 percent of homes and 60 percent of jobs in areas well served by transit, so it’s important to strengthen transit services in areas with the most opportunities for infill development, said Matt Vander Sluis, program director at Greenbelt Alliance.

Vander Sluis said he’d like to see MTC double the size of its Priority Conservation Area Grant Program to $10 million to better protect natural and agricultural lands through transportation investments that prevent sprawl.

“I think the drought will reinforce the notion that we can’t continue to sprawl outward, and, to protect our drinking water supplies, we need to grow smartly with more transit choices,” Vander Sluis said.

Going forward, there will be several opportunities to follow and weigh in on updates, including joint committee meetings scheduled by MTC and ABAG on July 10 and September 11.

In addition to public input, certain pilot projects and studies could influence updates as well, Kirkey said. This includes a climate adaptation pilot study that identified critical Alameda County areas vulnerable to climate change and in need of levees to reduce flooding and offer protection. Meanwhile, a core capacity transit study is exploring solutions to improve coordination between Bay Area transit operators.

Cecily O’Connor is a freelance journalist based in Corte Madera.