

← Back to Original Article

For the MWD, It Isn't Easy Being Green : Water: Has the scourge of environmentalists and Northern Californians changed its ways? Consider its new chairman.

December 03, 1992 | ROBERT GOTTLIEB | *Robert Gottlieb, a former director of the Metropolitan Water District, is the coauthor (with Margaret FitzSimmons) of "Thirst for Growth: Water Agencies as Hidden Government in California" (University of Arizona Press)*

Has the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the historic scourge of environmentalists, Northern Californians and Colorado River Basin states, become an environmental convert? Has MWD's old guard, which presided so long over its region's cycle of expansion and water development, collapsed in the face of forces beyond its control? Has this one aloof and unaccountable public entity at the heart of a hidden government of public agencies and private interests entered an era of change in policy and direction that no one quite knows where it might lead?

The answers to these questions--no, yes and maybe--situate a moment of transition for water agencies like the MWD, a water wholesaler serving more than 15 million people in six southern California counties. The agency has reluctantly come to understand that some of the traditional policy strategies from an earlier era of water development are no longer viable.

The occasion for this anticipation of change is the recent election of Michael Gage to the position of MWD board chairman. Gage, a self-proclaimed environmentalist, one-time deputy to Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and former state Assembly representative from Northern California, has indicated interest in redefining MWD along new lines, particularly how to obtain the water that's already there rather than undertaking a march to the north to grab new water not now available for a thirsty south.

Gage's election clearly represents one incontrovertible outcome: MWD's old guard has disappeared as a major actor within the organization. This disappearing act is not sudden: During this past decade the old guard played a passive role in a transitional period, in which any new initiative was taken at the staff rather than the board level.

Earlier, for more than five decades, the MWD old guard, led by such powerful and irascible board chairmen as Joe Jensen and Earle Blais, presided over a kind of water empire. It influenced (and controlled in Southern California) two huge imported water systems, the California State Water Project and the Colorado River Aqueduct, with plans to further expand this reliance on imported water. Imported water became the margin for uncontrolled and unbridled expansion in the region: If you followed the water, you followed the growth.

Old guard board members were part of a water industry: developers, bankers, engineers, construction men, politicians. Its power unchallenged, the board became a kind of gerontocracy, a Southern California version of the Politburo. Board tenure became a badge of honor.

But already by Blais' tenure in the late 1970s and early 1980s, signs of erosion were apparent. Blais mobilized his board for one last great crusade: the quest to build the Peripheral Canal. But the idea of securing new water for new growth was now facing what turned out to be overwhelming obstacles. Big water development projects cost too much, were too environmentally destructive and could no longer count on a pro-growth consensus, even in Southern California. The big defeat of the Peripheral Canal in 1982 became a shock to the water industry: Suppose you couldn't build any new dams and ditches, what then?

During the last 10 years, different water industry interests have slowly, perhaps inexorably, begun to adjust to the new, post-water-development realities. Talk within the water industry, even in gerontocratic MWD, shifted from water projects to water markets, expanding use to more efficient use, unlimited water for unlimited growth to reallocated water to accommodate growth.

The shift to be sure was uneven: Talk of new water development refused to die, even as it was cast in new garb, such as efficiency-oriented storage or water-quality-oriented facilities. But at MWD, the old guard remained puzzled, insecure, unable to respond. A leadership vacuum had emerged: Gage's election simply affirmed what had already become apparent.

Does this mean that MWD will go environmental? Don't count on it yet. While new strategies and new forms of consensus will be explored, the problem of the agency mission and that of the larger water industry still remains. It's not simply a matter of how you get the water, but what the water is used for.

Water agencies must think of themselves not simply as suppliers but as managers of demand. An urban water agency has to be a visible (and democratically accountable) part of the land-use planning process. It can't simply accommodate to the old expansionary forces, but has to see itself helping manage growth: equitably, environmentally, democratically. The Gage election only speaks to the supply side of the water-agency mission; it has yet to address the core environmental questions in an urban setting.

While the Gage election represents change in a turbulent era in water politics, it is a change that simply acknowledges a reality that could no longer be ignored: The oxygen mask for the water industry's old guard, at least at MWD, has been taken away. What comes next, despite the talk of revolution, still remains an open question.