

# Water Agency Urging Slow Growth May Be Dissolved

**Citing overlapping service areas, Los Angeles County commission suggests eliminating a Santa Clarita Valley district.**

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A small water district in northern Los Angeles County has been a lone voice warning that water supplies in the Santa Clarita area could disappear with rapid housing development.

Now officials at the Newhall County Water District said their agency is in danger of disappearing because its challenge to rapid development has rubbed people the wrong way.

The county's Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees hundreds of municipal boards, including Newhall, is proposing that the water district be dissolved because its service area overlaps those of neighboring water agencies.

The commission's officials believe the change would make water service more efficient and less confusing to customers. But Newhall board members contend the move is nothing more than a transparent attempt to muzzle them.

"They are overstating the water supply, and they want to shut us up," said board member Lynne Plambeck.

Water is a hot-button issue in the semi-rural Santa Clarita Valley 30 miles north of downtown Los Angeles, where tens of thousands of houses, including the 20,885-home Newhall Ranch, are to be built in the next decade.

The debate reflects tension statewide between developers and their advocates, who argue there's enough water to go around if it's managed properly, and environmentalists, who contend that optimistic projections can lead to too many houses and not enough water.

Calling it a "notion of trying to eliminate or neuter a utility that's asking those questions," Randy Kanouse, legislative officer for the East Bay Municipal Utility District in Northern California, asked: "What evidence can LAFCO put on the record to prove they need to abolish the district, or are they just shooting the messenger because they don't like the message?"

The proposal by the county commission to disband Newhall relies on a study by Dudek and Associates of Encinitas, Calif., that determined that some of Newhall's services duplicate those provided by the Santa Clarita Water Co. What's more, Newhall has been slow to provide water service to developers, causing at least two to seek withdrawal from the district and several others to threaten such action, said Larry Calemine, the commission's executive director.

"Some properties served by private wells have been waiting for four years for water service, with no indication on when it might be provided," the report says.

The frustrated developers are seeking to join Santa Clarita Water Co., which they view as more responsive to requests for new service.

These problems have led to Newhall's having the highest water rates in the valley, the report says.

Calemine said the commission's efforts are unrelated to the district's concerns about overdevelopment and the possibility of a water shortage.

"That had nothing to do with it," Calemine said. "It had to do with a duplication of services."

Newhall would be the first special district disbanded by the county commission. But numerous other consolidations have occurred across the state since 2000, when the Little Hoover Commission released a report saying that special districts had become "unnecessarily redundant, inefficient and unaccountable."

The county commission's proposal comes nine months after the Newhall water district — which supplies about 8,500 customers — passed a no-confidence vote against a planning document that estimates available water supplies for the Santa Clarita Valley.

The vote occurred in January, after Plambeck and two allies gained a majority of seats on the water board. Plambeck, who has been on the board for nearly a decade, also is president of the slow-growth advocacy group Santa Clarita Organization for Planning the Environment.

"We can't be relying on water supplies that may not be there in the future," said Plambeck, who believes the valley's water plan encourages over-pumping of the Santa Clarita River aquifer. She also believes the plan offers an unrealistic picture of future allocations from the California Aqueduct, which carries water to Southern California from the north.

Newhall's new board majority is writing its own plan containing more conservative estimates of future water supplies.

The disputed water plan says that the valley should be able to receive 103,000 to 180,000 acre-feet of water in a normal year. An acre-foot is 326,000 gallons, enough to supply two average families for a year. But Plambeck said she believes availability is closer to 64,000 acre-feet a year.

She and her like-minded colleagues argue that a number of local wells that were shut down because they contain ammonium perchlorate, an ingredient of rocket fuel, should not be included as future sources of water until they are cleaned up.

But her opponents say the contaminated wells should be relied upon because a cleanup strategy is being developed and the wells could be pumping as early as next year.

Newhall's position was vindicated in September by the state's 5th District Court of Appeal in Fresno, which ruled that the Urban Water Management Plan was flawed because it relied on the tainted wells. Santa Clarita Valley water retailers were ordered to revise the document before it could be used to justify more development.

"Without a reliable analysis of the availability of water, the [plan] is fatally flawed," the appellate court wrote. "The public and the various governmental entities that rely on the [Urban Water Management Plan] may be seriously misled by it and, if the wrong set of circumstances occur, the consequences to those who relied on the [water plan], as well as those who share a water supply with them, could be severe."

The decision was issued in response to a lawsuit filed by Friends of the Santa Clara River and the Sierra Club, which were concerned about the effects of development on the Santa Clara River, Los Angeles County's last untamed river.

Water management plans are becoming increasingly important in California land-use decisions because of legislation successfully sponsored by Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica) three years ago that requires developers to prove they have reliable supplies of water, even during drought years.

In a letter sent last week to the county commission, Kuehl suggested that one reason Newhall has been slow in hooking up water supplies is that it is trying to comply with the legislation.

"In attempting to follow this new legislation, the district has clearly offended major development interests," she wrote. "It appears these interests may have come to LAFCO in the hopes of avoiding the sort of rigorous analysis that is now required by the water code. It also appears this may be the underlying reason that LAFCO is proposing that this district be dissolved."

The commission is scheduled to consider the proposal to dissolve the Newhall County Water District on Nov. 30.