

# Desert valley eyed in latest water war

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Associated Press

AMBOY, Calif. — In Southern California's endless search for water supplies, the Fenner Valley seems an unlikely target.

The remote stretch of Mojave Desert is filled with salt-encrusted dry lakes, crossed by lonely two-lane roads and dotted with abandoned shacks.

Beneath the valley, however, lies a reservoir of billions of gallons of water, the result of centuries of rain and snowmelt.

It is the region's ability to store such great amounts of water — and its greatly debated ability to

replenish itself — that has put the Fenner Valley in the middle of California's latest water war.

The Metropolitan Water District, which serves 17 million Southern California residents, wants to buy ground water from Cadiz Inc., a company that holds the rights to much of the aquifer and farms 1,600 acres of vineyards and citrus orchards in the valley.

Rancher Rob Blair, who runs 400 head of cattle in the valley, fears the project will drain the aquifer, leaving his wells dry.

"They want to sell it to L.A. so they can wash their streets off,"

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# WATER: Environmentalists wary

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Blair said. "I don't appreciate that."

Environmentalists and officials with the U.S. Geological Survey and National Park Service also are wary of the plans.

They say the aquifer could be drained enough to affect surface water, threatening habitat for bighorn sheep, desert tortoises and other species, including some in neighboring wilderness areas and Joshua Tree National Park.

If it's depleted enough, they warn the Fenner Valley could become a dust bowl, drawing parallels to Los Angeles' infamous water grab in the Owens Valley.

Los Angeles' Department of Water and Power tapped Owens Lake with a 230-mile aqueduct in 1913, turning the lake into a carcinogenic dustbed. In 1999 the city agreed to spend \$100 million to clean up the air pollution by 2006.

MWD officials said their Fenner Valley project will be environmentally benign, even if the natural rate of recharging the underground water supply is less than Cadiz's scientists expect.

"The environmental protections are extensive beyond almost anything we have seen in the state of California," said Tim Blair, MWD principal resource specialist.

Water cannot be pumped out for the first five years of the program, while a monitoring program gets more precise data about how much water seeps back into the ground each year.

Behind the debate is MWD's need to quickly increase its capacity for storing water. An agreement with other western states requires California to reduce its annual use of Colorado River water by 800,000 acre-feet within 15 years.

The district plans to use the desert aquifer to store up to a million acre-feet — enough water to serve about two million families for a year. It would join several other water-storage projects, including the Diamond Valley Lake Reservoir opened last year and other underground storage work along the aqueduct.

MWD and Cadiz are proposing a 35-mile canal



**Rancher Rob Blair** stands near his supply of well water near Essex, Calif., that could be affected by a proposal to send billions of gallons of Fenner Valley water to the Metropolitan Water District.

between Cadiz's property about 160 miles east of Los Angeles and MWD's Colorado River aqueduct. They will split the cost of the \$150 million project.

Cadiz, which has been losing money on its farming operations, would earn at least \$6.9 million a year from selling the ground water, according to its tentative contract with the MWD.

The water district and farming company are scheduled to make their contract final this month, with a U.S. Bureau of Land Management environmental impact report due in May. The BLM has final say over the project and expects to make a decision a few months after the report's release.

Under the plan, up to 150,000 acre-feet of river water could be recharged into the aquifer during wet years, while water would be pumped out during dry years.

There has been little criticism of the underground storage element of the project. It creates fewer environmental problems and less evaporation than an above-ground reservoir.

However, the plan to pump more water than what the MWD will replenish has drawn more than 7,000 opposing e-mails from environmentalists, as well as criticism from federal officials.