



# OP-ED FACT CHECK

*The City of Fresno presents a comprehensive response to an opinion piece written by local politician Doug Vagim that was published in the Fresno Bee on February 25, 2015. The article, titled “Fresno’s water plan is a boondoggle,” is filled with inaccuracies, falsehoods, ill-informed theories and unfounded accusations. The copy of Mr. Vagim’s op-ed is presented below with an official fact check provided by the City’s Department of Public Utilities:*

“The City of Fresno says if it builds the proposed southeast water-treatment plant, the water will come. Not true! This will be just another city boondoggle like the Grizzlies Stadium and the rest.”

“That’s because the city does not have its own water storage.”

“Fresno’s allotted Millerton Lake water is not guaranteed. Last year, the city received no water from Millerton, and the year before, it received only around one-third of its contract amount.”

**Response: This is a misleading and uninformed statement. While no lake anywhere in the world can provide a guaranteed supply of water from year to year, during the period of record from 1965 to 2014, the City was entitled to receive an average of 173,000 acre-feet per year (AF/year) of water from Millerton Lake and Pine Flat Reservoir. The City is proposing to produce 110,000 AF/year of surface water to address overdraft issues and water quality issues in the community. The City’s recommended water plan proposes to use only 63 percent of the City’s historic average annual water supply entitlement. During 46 of the past 50 years, the City of Fresno was entitled to receive more surface water than would have been required to produce 110,000 AF of surface water, and in those years when excess surface water entitlements are available, the City will direct those waters to groundwater recharge facilities.**

“The city does not have a sufficient and steady flow of lake water for Mayor Ashley Swearengin’s plan to operate efficiently and be cost effective. The city claims there’s enough lake water to run a new southeast plant and the existing northeast water-treatment plant to provide 180,000 acre feet of groundwater recharge each year.”

**Response: This is an incorrect statement. The City’s consistent statement has been that the recommended plan is to produce 110,000 AF/year of surface water to address existing groundwater overdraft issues and groundwater contamination issues – both of which present public health and safety risks to the community.**

“Historically, however, lake water delivered to Fresno is on a day-to-day basis, and nearly all of this allotted lake water is delivered in a four-month period during the snowmelt runoff. That’s too much water for these plants to process.”

**Response: This is an incorrect statement and uninformed statement. Both the City of Clovis and the City of Fresno depend on surface water from Pine Flat Reservoir to serve their respective surface water treatment plants. In addition, both Clovis and Fresno take Pine Flat Reservoir water deliveries all year round from the Fresno Irrigation District (FID), except for the period from approximately Nov. 1 to Dec. 31 of each year to allow FID to perform needed canal maintenance. The City of Fresno is planning to build two new raw water pipelines – one to serve the 30 million gallon per day (mgd) Northeast Surface Water Treatment Facility (NE SWTF) and one to serve the 80 mgd Southeast Surface Water Treatment Facility (SE SWTF) – to allow for year round operation so that the City of Fresno’s operational needs do not interfere with FID’s canal maintenance. The City of Fresno wants to make it abundantly clear that FID has been, and will continue to be, a much needed and valued water supply partner for the City, both now and in the future. Any suggestion by the writer that FID has not been cooperative and collaborative in working with the City of Fresno to deliver water from Pine Flat Reservoir to the community is misleading.**



“Unlike Los Angeles and San Francisco, our city lacks its own surface-water storage. In Fresno, the city will depend on the limited storage in Pine Flat Lake that Fresno Irrigation District (FID) has to service its 600-square-mile area.”

**Response: This is a misleading and uninformed statement. Millerton Lake and Pine Flat Reservoir are excellent water supply storage facilities. While the City does not own storage capacity in either facility, the City has the ability to carryover surplus water in Millerton Lake when water supply and storage capacity are available. In addition, the City has the flexibility to coordinate with FID for water deliveries from Pine Flat Reservoir and Millerton Lake to meet our operational needs and schedule. The City of Fresno (as well as the City of Clovis) takes water deliveries all year round from FID for our respective water treatment plants, except for the period from approximately Nov. 1 to Dec. 31 of each year to allow FID to perform needed canal maintenance. To reiterate, FID has been, and will continue to be, a much needed and valued water supply partner for the City both now and in the future.**

“The data shows that in most years, the additional treatment plant’s operation would be limited to running at less than 50% capacity or be turned off for over half of the year. That will not improve by adding the proposed Enterprise Accountability and Oversight Act — or anything else but more water storage.”

**Response: This is an incorrect statement. During the period of record from 1965 to 2014, the City was entitled to receive an average of 173,000 AF/year of water from Millerton Lake and Pine Flat Reservoir. The City’s recommended water plan will produce 110,000 AF/year of surface water to address existing overdraft issues and water quality issues in the community. The City’s recommended water plan proposes to use only 63 percent of the City’s historic average annual water supply entitlement. During 46 of the past 50 years, the City of Fresno was entitled to receive more surface water than would have been required to produce 110,000 AF of surface water, and in those years when excess surface water entitlements are available, the City will direct those waters to groundwater recharge facilities.**

“The city depends on two lakes (Millerton and Pine Flat) to supply its surface water, and neither is under Fresno’s control. The agencies that do control the lakes deliver the city’s water portion on their own delivery schedule, and we must take the water when delivered or share it with FID. None of the water released by the city “goes down the river to the ocean” — a too-often repeated sound bite from the mayor and others.”

**Response: This is a misleading and uninformed statement. The City of Clovis also depends on Pine Flat Reservoir to serve its surface water treatment plant, but Clovis does not have the added benefit of Central Valley Project (CVP) water in Millerton Lake. Both Clovis and Fresno coordinate with the FID to receive surface water on a year around basis with the exception of approximately Nov. 1 to Dec. 31 of each year to allow FID to perform needed canal maintenance. The City is planning to build two new raw water pipelines – one to serve the NE SWTF and one to serve the SE SWTF – to allow for year round operation so that our operational needs do not interfere with FID’s canal maintenance needs. Once again, FID has been, and will continue to be, a much needed and valued water supply partner for the City both now and in the future.**

“The plants do not create water, and they do not store water; they process and treat ditch water for human consumption. Every drop of the city’s water entitlement has been put to a beneficial use for its own use or by allowing the local, small farm growers of FID to use for crop production and groundwater recharge.”

“This had been the process for the city and local growers for nearly 80 years, and very little will change by building an oversized water-treatment plant without more surface water storage.”

**Response: This is an incorrect and uninformed statement. The City’s groundwater aquifer levels have fallen more than 100 feet in the last 80 years, and four feet in 2014 – and groundwater contamination plumes have spread in the City. Unfortunately, and regrettably, a LOT has changed in the last 80 years under the current water resource management strategy, and it cost more for energy and treatment systems to deliver water to the community. The City’s consistent statement has been that the recommended plan is to produce 110,000 AF/year of surface water to address existing groundwater overdraft issues and groundwater contamination issues, both of which present public health and safety risks to the community, and are the legacy of historic groundwater management practices.**



“The historic structure of our surface water source for this region is more like a water collective than a bully-take-all method, like Los Angeles is to the Owens Valley. The city of Fresno seems to heading in that direction.”

“Moreover, the rates to pay for the mayor’s plan will impact too many households.”

“The public utilities director admits that the water rates are set so when households are forced to scrimp on water to afford their water bills, revenue will drop, but enough cash will roll in to pay the project’s debt.”

**Response: We seriously question the writer’s motives in suggesting that conservation of a precious and limited resource is bad for the community. The City does indeed want to continue to promote and encourage water conservation in the community to reflect the value of the resource. From 2008 to 2013, community water conservation efforts resulted in reducing average daily water usage in the community from about 310 gallons per person per day to less than 250 gallons per person per day. In 2014, the City’s water consumption fell to approximately 222 gallons per person per day. It would be irresponsible of the City to continue to promote and encourage water conservation, and not factor in the change in consumption into the financial plan. The rate plan considers that the community will reduce water consumption from its current average rate of 16,231 gallons per month to 12,234 gallons per month. If consumption does not reduce to the levels forecasted in the rate plan, the City will receive surplus revenues, and those revenues will be used to accelerate debt payments.**

“Two-thirds of that debt would flow from the new southeast plant. So, once again, it’s the tale of those who can afford to pay and those who will suffer.”

**Response: The proposed rates meet the State’s indices of affordability for all years of the rate plan, and as an added measure of safety, the Administration is proposing a Water Affordability Credit for income-qualified residents to mitigate the cost impacts. Further, the City has designed the rate plan in a manner that give residents, businesses, industries, and institutions greater control of the monthly water bill costs. Specifically, for a single-family residential account using 18 HCF of water per month, the City’s current schedule of rates, fees and charges for water service allocates 45 percent of the monthly water bill cost to the consumption charge (controllable) and 55 percent of the monthly water bill cost to the fixed monthly charge (not controllable). The recommended rate plan is designed to allocate 64 percent of the monthly water bill cost to the consumption charge and 36 percent of the water bill cost to the fixed monthly charge (again, single-family residential customer class using 18 HCF per month). The Administration believes this new pricing structure will give greater control of monthly water bill costs to accountholders and promote water efficiency, and reduce per-person consumption in the City of Fresno. For example, in the fifth year of the rate plan without conservation the monthly water bill cost will increase from \$24.49 per month to \$49.22 per month (\$25.73 per month increase over five years). However, if the residential accountholder reduces water consumption by 20 percent, the fifth year monthly water bill cost will increase to \$42.96 per month (\$18.47 per month increase over five years).**

“Instead, the northeast treatment plant should be expanded first. Fully operational all year, it would save 60 million gallons per day of groundwater at a fraction of building a new southeast plant.”

**Response: This is a misleading and uninformed statement. The construction required to implement this alternative includes the Friant-Kern Raw Water Pipeline to deliver water to the NE SWTF, the 30 mgd expansion of the NE SWTF, and Finished Water Pipelines to deliver treated water to the community. The estimated cost for these facilities is \$196 million, which translates to a unit cost factor of \$6.50 per gallon. In addition to being more expensive for the community on a unit-cost basis, the 30 mgd of surface water treatment associated with this alternative is insufficient to balance the City’s water budget, and it does not adequately address the groundwater contamination issues in the City. This alternative costs less because it results in smaller facilities, and those smaller facilities are insufficient to address the existing overdraft issues and groundwater contamination issues that plague the City and present public health and safety risks to the community. The recommended water plan calls for the construction of Friant-Kern Raw Water Pipeline to deliver water to the NE SWTF, the Kings River Raw Water Pipeline to deliver water to the new 80 mgd SE SWTF, and the Finished Water Pipelines to deliver water to the community. The estimated cost for these facilities is \$340 million, which translates to a unit cost factor of \$4.25 per gallon. The facilities in the recommended water plan have been planned and sized to completely address the community’s existing overdraft issues and groundwater contamination issues to protect public health and safety.**



“The southeast plant’s main water supply would be from Pine Flat Lake. However, without an unknown and costly water exchange agreement, not one drop can go into central Fresno! It’s kind of like we’re hearing the now famous statement “we need to pass it so we’ll know what’s in it” repeated.”

**Response: This is a misleading and uninformed statement. First, the City will not enter into an exchange agreement with FID. Rather, we will enter into a Conveyance Agreement. The existing Conveyance Agreement was drafted close to 40 years ago, and it has served FID and the City of Fresno well during that period. At the time the existing Conveyance Agreement was executed, the Agreement did not contemplate surface water treatment facilities, recycled water facilities, the expansion of recharge basins by the Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District, the spread of groundwater contamination, or the enactment of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). Again, the existing conveyance agreement has served FID and the City well for the past 40 years, and both FID and the City of Fresno have agreed that it is time to update the Conveyance Agreement to reflect current conditions. It is our joint goal to work together to craft a new agreement that will serve the community well for the next 40 years. FID is an excellent water supply partner for the City of Fresno, and will continue to be well into the future.**

“Why are the mayor and Fresno City Council asking us to go it alone and recharge an underground water basin with a land area that’s over 100 times larger than our city? We’re being asked to pay for the recharge of a basin with no walls and where underground water flows like a river.”

“An almost certain requirement for the city by California’s Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) of 2014 will be more cooperative agreements with the other stakeholders in the Fresno/Clovis metro area.”

“The two cities, along with FID and the Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District, can achieve together the object of the mayor’s plan to “Recharge Fresno” and can meet the goals of the SGMA with less expense and debt on the city’s ratepayers.”

**Response: This is an uninformed statement. The City of Fresno has already started the process of coordinating with our regional water partners to prepare groundwater sustainability plans in accordance with the compliance schedule stipulated by the SGMA, and we are collectively in the midst of drafting a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the goals and objectives of our cooperative effort. It is the expectation of our regional water partners that Fresno, the single, largest groundwater extractor in the basin, will take the necessary actions to cease the overdrafting of the aquifer and the spread of groundwater contamination plumes. The recommended water plan includes \$6.4 million to work with Clovis, Fresno Metropolitan Flood Control District, and FID to develop more groundwater recharge basins in our area. In addition, the water plan includes a new surface water treatment facility to allow the City to produce 110,000 AF/year of surface water to address existing overdraft issues and groundwater contamination issues, both of which present public health and safety risks to the community. The recommended 80 mgd SE SWTF will address both groundwater overdraft and groundwater contamination conditions that currently exist in the City.**