

L.A. water feud that made 'Chinatown' famous is flowing again

Los Angeles Times

LONE PINE, Calif. — Seeking to undo damage inflicted by distant Los Angeles for more than 80 years, a pollution board this week took a major step toward forcing the city to return a large portion of its coveted water to Owens Lake to curb dust storms that rip through foothill and desert towns.

Under the plan, the city notorious for its unquenchable thirst would be forced to give up 13 percent of its cheapest water source, enough to meet the needs of more than 100,000 families every year. Consumer water rates would rise about 9 percent, and in drought years, the extra demand would strain Southern California's limited supply of imported water,

triggering a predicted water shortage one year out of every 20.

The unparalleled, \$70 million project would cover 35 square miles of the parched lake with a mix of shallow water, gravel and vegetation. The plan is designed to control salt crystals that sit atop the sprawling lake bed, and — whipped up by winds — occasionally drape the Owens Valley with tons of white powder that blots out the sun.

In a unanimous vote, the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District endorsed the remedy after 14 years of exploring ideas to cure the unusual pollution problem. After an environmental review, the air board will approve a final version of the

project in May.

In addition to the estimated \$70 million in construction costs, the city of Los Angeles, which drains the Owens River before it can flow into Owens Lake, would have to spend about \$23 million annually to replace its lost supply. Extra water would have to be imported from Northern California and the Colorado River.

The dispute over Owens Lake pits rural outposts such as Keeler in the eastern shadow of the Sierra Nevada against California's largest and most influential city, 200 miles to the southwest.

James Wickser, assistant general manager of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, called it an exorbitant and

unrealistic expense for a dust solution that city engineers are dubious will work. He said the Owens Valley is taking advantage of the city's "deep pockets."

"If the people in Owens Valley had to pay for the solution, I'd bet my paycheck that no one there would care about the dust problem at Owens Lake," Wickser said.

The city's attitude infuriates many of the 40,000 people from Lone Pine to Ridgecrest who periodically choke on the eye-stinging, throat-burning grit that blows off the playa.

Los Angeles "created the situation, so they ought to fix it," said Andy Morris, a retiree in Keeler, a town of 50 on the eastern shore

of Owens Lake. "All they've been doing is sitting on their ass for 100 years, studying the lake. There's one simple answer. Put the water back where you stole from it. How many generations does it take to study it?"

As much as 4 million tons of the salty particles blow off the dry lake every year.

Particulates are considered among the most dangerous air pollutants, since they can clog airways, penetrate the lungs and aggravate serious lung and heart diseases, such as asthma, and bring on infections and coughs.

One day last year in Keeler, particles surged to a nationwide record of 23 times greater than a federal health standard allows.

Keeler residents are exposed to unhealthy levels 25 days a year, while in Ridgecrest, 60 miles south of the lake, it occurs on 10 days a year, according to the Great Basin air agency.

The water war between Los Angeles and the Owens Valley is an infamous tale of greed and scandal that inspired the movie "Chinatown." As it boomed in the early 1900s, Los Angeles went to great lengths to take control of the water from farmers and ranchers in the Eastern Sierra.

In 1913, the city's aqueduct began diverting the Owens River, turning the alkaline lake into a giant dust bowl by the 1920s and transporting massive volumes of water to Los Angeles, now worth \$170 million a year.