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A small invasive shellfish is playing havoc with Central Basin's budget

By Mike Sprague, Whittier Daily News

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COMMERCE >> Resolving contamination issues with the quagga mussel, a small invasive shellfish, could make the difference between a slightly balanced budget and one that is seriously in the red for Central Basin Municipal Water District.

The approximate \$50.7 million budget, approved Monday by the Board of Directors, projects \$1.7 million in revenue coming from selling water to the Water Replenishment District of Southern California.

Only right now, there's no way to get water to the WRD because Los Angeles County won't allow Central Basin's supplier, the

Metropolitan Water District, to deliver because of the contamination issues.

The quagga mussel is present in both of the water sources for the MWD — the Colorado River is contaminated with the shellfish, and the State Water Project has traces of it, said Kevin Hunt, Central Basin general manager.

Without the revenue from WRD, the district's ending balance goes from a surplus of about \$330,000 to a deficit of about \$1.4 million.

"The quagga mussel issue is a serious one and we're working on it," Hunt said. "I'm committing that by September if we don't have a resolution, I will provide a revised budget that will deal with losing \$1.7 million in revenue."

[The freshwater mussels](#), native to Eastern Europe, have wreaked environmental havoc in the Great Lakes. The tiny bivalves have been recently discovered closer to home in Lake Mead, Lake Mohave and Lake Havasu. All three lie along the Colorado River.

[Los Angeles County Public Works officials](#) have said if the quagga mussel were to get into bodies of water like reservoirs and lakes, it quickly depletes the oxygen supply, resulting in the loss of fish.

The shellfish also can plug outlets on dams that could create a problem in an emergency like a flood or earthquake, Los Angeles County public works officials say.

The quagga mussel issue comes at a tough time for Central Basin, which already was facing budget issues, mostly as a result of declining water sales due to the drought.

Hunt's budget projects water sales will fall from about an expected 28,000 acre feet this year — they actually were at that amount — to about 18,500 and that will cost the district nearly \$300,000, in part because its rates went up earlier this year and will go up again on July 1.

An acre-foot, which is equal to 326,000 gallons, can be visualized as a football field submerged in one foot of water. It's enough to serve two families for a year.

“We have some real and severe problems,” Hunt said. “We have (lower) water sales, which is something I didn’t foresee. We had to pay over \$1 million due to lawsuits we continued to settle. We’ve been put on credit risk by rating agencies.”

There’s also A.B. 1794, the reform bill approved last year as the result of the state audit that slammed the district for a number of deficiencies and added three non-elected officials to the board.

It cost the district \$100,000, in part because the district is having to fight lawsuits filed by former Pico Rivera Councilman Ron Beilke and the city of Huntington Park challenging that law, Hunt said. However, much of that money, if not all, may be recoverable from the state, he added.

As a result, Hunt’s budget included \$340,000 in budget cuts, including not funding a water resources specialist position, reductions in staff travel and conferences, elimination of money for a strategic plan, engineering, board and other consultants.

Legal costs also are expected to fall.

“We’re going to manage a very tight ship this year,” he said.

Central Basin Director Mark Grajeda said the board has been pushing Hunt to make budget cuts and suggested a hiring freeze.

Hunt said he needs to fill the now vacant chief financial officer’s position and some internships but otherwise has no plans to fill any other positions.

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