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# Deal keeps Mountain House water flowing



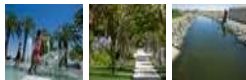
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Children play in the interactive fountain at the splash park at Central Community Park in the Mountain House development on Monday. CLIFFORD OTO/THE RECORD



**By Alex Breitler**  
Record Staff Writer

Posted Jun. 22, 2015 at 8:46 PM

**MOUNTAIN HOUSE** — Water will continue to flow to Mountain House under a deal reached Monday, and a separate water sale pending approval Tuesday would slake the community's thirst for the rest of the year, officials said.

The events of the past week, however, shine a spotlight on the master-plan community's vulnerability to severe drought. Mountain House and its more than 14,000 residents have only one source of water.

The search is on to secure a more diverse supply for years down the road, the town's general manager, Ed Pattison, said after his Board of Directors met in special closed session for an hour Monday afternoon.

"We're going to get through this, and we're going to be the stronger for it," Pattison said.

The taps at Mountain House never really were in danger of running dry. But if no deal had been reached Monday, the town's supply could have been chopped roughly in half, and with only about a week's worth of water in its storage tanks. Under a worst-case scenario, outdoor irrigation would



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have been eliminated, jeopardizing about \$80 million in mature landscaping and putting at risk future investment in the community.

This all started when the town's water supplier, the Byron-Bethany Irrigation District, was told by the state earlier this month that it no longer can pump water from the south Delta under its more than century-old water right.

The district was worried that it would be penalized by the state if it continued to ship water to Mountain House.

Under the terms of Monday's deal, Mountain House will shoulder any potential fines or possible litigation brought by the state.

But if the other water deal with Manteca-based South San Joaquin Irrigation District is approved Tuesday, that should supply enough water to get Mountain House through the rest of the year without needing to rely on Byron-Bethany, Pattison said. He said he believes the sale with South San Joaquin is "probable," and state officials said Monday that their approval is not needed to proceed.

Jeff Shields, general manager of South San Joaquin, said in an email that he "would not put a wager on whether the board will be able to provide water (to Mountain House) under the current circumstances." But Pattison said he is pursuing other possible deals as well.

Monday's agreement basically is a stop-gap measure in case those other efforts fail.

If Mountain House's water supply was ever really in danger of getting cut in half, that wasn't obvious to visitors driving around town on Monday.

Kids splashed at a play fountain in the public park. (The fountain uses recirculated water.) Landscapers edged lawns, some of which were browner than normal, and leafy green trees shaded blooming flowers and vegetable gardens. Construction workers hammered on the frames of new homes on the west side of town.

Some residents were resigned to the possibility that all outdoor water use might be eliminated or severely curtailed.

"That would be the best place to start," said Debbie Knapp, a newcomer whose family hasn't yet decided whether to settle in Mountain House. "It makes the most sense."

If all else fails, Mountain House can ask the State Water Resources Control Board for permission to continue receiving a limited amount of water for health and human safety, but that option comes with other restrictions, including adding no more connections to the town's water system.

Being limited to about 50 gallons per person per day for health and human safety would be "crazy — especially now, in the summertime," said 49-year-old Lizette Ortiz, whose family, like many others, moved here in order to commute to jobs in the East Bay.

"It would be a disaster," Ortiz said. "Nobody wants to buy a house in an area where you don't have enough water."

But asking the state for health and human safety water is "not necessarily" the course Mountain House will pursue if other potential deals don't work out, the general manager said. The town can continue to divert under its agreement with Byron-Bethany, though it risks accruing fines in the process.

Pattison also noted that a number of water districts have challenged the state board's authority to cut senior water users, and the outcome of those lawsuits remains unclear.

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