

KINGS COUNTY FARM BUREAU

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District Banks on Water Deliveries

by Amy Roberts

Thanks to the foresight of early day Kings County Water District board members, the critical water needs of farmers are still being met today.

In 1949, a group of local farmers who were concerned about water rights being sold, and consequently this precious commodity leaving the area, formed an alliance and created the Water Protective League. By 1954 a decision was made to rename the organization the Kings County Water District and Ralph Morgan became its first formal manager. However, he died within a couple of years and Gerald Schumacher, one of the original founders, took over the duties of secretary/manager.

During Schumacher's leadership KCWD continued to grow by his insistence in buying stock in local ditch companies and taking proactive steps to secure water. He also protected old slough channels as recharge and management basins. Schumacher was also responsible for keeping the office running and in 1970 found he needed to fill a secretarial position. The position was filled by Cheryl Lehn, who was a recent high school graduate at the time. Realizing she had a keen sense and dedication about water, he encouraged her to accept educational opportunities and became her mentor. Eventually Lehn stepped into the position of KCWD's manager when he retired in 1986.

Because of Schumacher's mentorship, Lehn was able to step seamlessly into the position and continue his level of stewardship. Over the course of the decade she worked as manager, KCWD met varying water challenges including seven years of drought and new regulations designed to protect, manage and limit the waste of what was becoming a more precious resource.

Lehn also developed ideas she perceived needed to be addressed including increased public awareness and educational projects.

Concerned about public perception of water issues, Lehn saw a need to speak to service clubs and other agencies about the importance of water to agriculture. She also started an educational program, which she presented to kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms in all Kings County schools to promote water safety around ditches. Dippy Duck became the featured mascot in coloring books and a yearly poster contest culminated with a bike giveaway for the winner in each grade level.

After Lehn 'retired' from KCWD in 1996 to become a governmental water specialist, the manager's position was filled briefly by a couple of people.

During that time, Don Mills briefly filled in as interim manager and eventually the KCWD board prevailed upon him to take over as the permanent general manager in 1998.

Mills also brought a wealth of knowledge, about water and KCWD, having served on the Board of Directors since 1980. He was board president when Lehn took a different position and helped out until a replacement was hired. When that person didn't work out, he again filled in.

"Ultimately one of the board members said, 'Heck you aren't doing anything why don't you apply?'"

Since Mills was semi-retired from farming at the time, he decided he would like the position. After resigning from the board, he applied.

"And luckily the board chose me," he said. "I was a known



Don Mills says banking water helps farmers in Kings County

commodity and they felt comfortable with the job I was doing."

The work of KCWD remains focused on securing and supplying enough water to fill the needs of the approximately 300 farmers who grow a variety of crops on 143,000 acres mostly in the northeast corner of Kings County.

"We are more aggressive in finding additional surface water supplies through Valley contacts," Mills said, adding geologic studies have enabled KCWD to start a ground water banking project with the first land in Kings County purchased in 2002, which is currently storing 20,000 acre feet of water. Banking, he said, not only contributes to recharge efforts but is also a tool that allows the district to extract water.

This recharge and recovery effort allows for water to be pumped out of wells and put into ditches for farmers to use at a later date, Mills explained.

"The board is so pleased with the results of the Apex Ranch that they have instructed me to find the next location, which we hope is within a five mile radius," he said.

The geology of these soils boasts a strong infiltration rate, Mills said, adding that sandy soil near old river channels can hold more water compared to other soils. By using these channels it also costs less to recover water since Mother Nature has already provided the type of system needed, he said.

KCWD is also involved in building partnerships with local cities to address supply issues and work on legislation.

Besides Mills, Renee Davis has been a valuable office employee for over 11 years. A five-member board of directors, with Micky Murray presiding as president, oversees the planning and direction of KCWD.

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