

A DRY SPELL & AN EMERGENCY PIPELINE

The conservation and legislative impacts of the 1976-1977 drought - one of the driest periods in California's history - still reverberate today.

Before 1976, most water agencies believed that California had an ample supply of water. **When the 1976-1977 drought hit, the Golden State suddenly found itself ill-prepared to deal with the extremely dry conditions.** Marin County's plight exemplified what many areas of the state faced.

In the 1970s, Marin County relied primarily on surface water sources. Run-off from the Russian River and Eel River, collected in Lake Mendocino via Lake Pillsbury, usually supplied the county with plenty of water. During the drought, northern Marin County accessed groundwater through wells drilled by the City of Rohnert Park to supply water for their residents. Southern Marin County, with a much larger population, could not find similar water sources.

Increasingly desperate officials considered many possibilities to quench the water deficit, including towing in and melting an iceberg from Chile. Eventually, Dietrich Stroeh, then-General Manager of the Marin Municipal Water District, and local officials diverted 250,000-acre-feet of water from

Northern California reserves allotted for Southern California via an emergency pipeline built across the San Rafael Bridge. *One acre-foot of water is about the same size as an eight-lane swimming pool. One acre-foot is also the average annual water usage of a suburban family household.*

"THE MOST POPULAR LESSON OF THIS [EVENT] IS THAT PEOPLE, WHEN EDUCATED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS AT STAKE, WILL RESPOND. WATER CONSUMPTION WAS REDUCED BY 65 PERCENT." – **John Burton**, former California State Senator and U.S. Congressman who represented much of Marin County

This short but extremely dry period revealed its vulnerabilities and led to major conservation and legislative changes. In 1977, Governor Jerry Brown established a Drought Emergency Task Force, comprised of members from state and federal agencies, private entities, and the Commander of the National Guard. The program included:

- activation of a drought information center,
- drought contingency plans by local water agencies,
- development of drought conservation guidelines,
- encouragement of water exchanges,
- loans and equipment for emergency water supplies,
- extension of federal disaster relief,
- establishment of a commission to review and recommend changes in California water rights law,
- and a special hearing on water quality in the Delta.

The actions taken in the 1970s spurred continued water reform in the state. Today, the government's drought plans work to protect water supply for drinking, farming, fishing, tribal traditions, and other uses, as well as for the health of the ecosystems that rely on rivers and streams.



The emergency pipeline over the San Rafael Bridge. During the drought, Marin County lacked the infrastructure needed to bring the water to the county. Marin County's wealthy residents also had access to major legislators. Leveraging a former council member's friendship with President Jimmy Carter, Marin County officials met with President Carter's and Congressman Burton's offices to ask for funding. In June of 1977, an emergency pipeline was completed across the San Rafael Bridge. This pipeline supplied southern Marin County with water from the California Delta. Photo courtesy of Marin Municipal Water District.