



**SAWPA COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
OCTOBER 7, 2025**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT

Mike Gardner, Chair, Western Municipal Water District
Gil Botello, Vice Chair, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District
Philip E. Paule, Secretary-Treasurer, Eastern Municipal Water District
Jasmin A. Hall, Inland Empire Utilities Agency
Denis Bilodeau, Orange County Water District [via – zoom]

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT

None

**COMMISSIONERS PRESENT;
NON-VOTING**

Fred Jung, Orange County Water District [via – zoom]
David Slawon, Eastern Municipal Water District [via – zoom]
T. Milford Harrison, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District

STAFF PRESENT

Karen Williams, David Ruhl, Shavonne Turner, Dean Unger, John Leete, Ian Achimore, Alison Lewis, Marie Jauregui, Emily Fuentes, Daniel Vasquez, Haley Gohari, Rick Whetsel, Bonnie Fitzgerald, Natalia Gonzalez, Sara Villa

OTHERS PRESENT

Thomas S. Bunn, Lagerlof, LLP; Aimee Zhao, Inland Empire Utilities Agency; Ken Tam, Inland Empire Utilities Agency; William McDonnell, Inland Empire Utilities Agency; John Kennedy, Orange County Water District; Jonathan Powell, Orange County Sanitation District; Adekunle Ojo, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District; Craig Miller, Western Municipal Water District; Carly Pierce, Western Municipal Water District; Derek Kawaii, Western Municipal Water District; Mallory O'Connor, Western Municipal Water District; Pete Vicario, City of Chino

The Regular Meeting of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority Commission was called to order at 9:30 a.m. by Chair Gardner on behalf of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, 11615 Sterling Avenue, Riverside, California, and Denis Bilodeau at 601 N. Ross Street, Room 327, Santa Ana, CA 92701.

1. CALL TO ORDER

2. ROLL CALL

An oral roll call was duly noted and recorded by the Clerk of the Board.

3. PUBLIC COMMENTS

There were no public comments.

4. ITEMS TO BE ADDED OR DELETED

There were no items to be added or deleted.

5. **CONSENT CALENDAR**

A. **APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES: SEPTEMBER 2, 2025**

Recommendation: Approve as posted.

B. **TREASURER'S REPORT: AUGUST 2025**

Recommendation: Approve as posted.

MOVED, to approve the Consent Calendar as posted.

Result:	Adopted by Roll Call Vote (5-0)
Motion/Second:	Paule/Botello
Ayes:	Bilodeau, Botello, Gardner, Hall, Paule
Nays:	None
Abstentions:	None
Absent:	None

6. **NEW BUSINESS**

A. **RIVERSIDE COUNTY PARKS RANGER FUNDING (CM#2025.71)**

Ian Achimore provided a presentation titled Riverside County Parks Rangers Proposal, contained in the agenda packet on pages 29-42.

The purpose of this proposal is a follow-up to the September 16 Commission meeting and request that the SAWPA Commission discuss and consider funding one or two Riverside County Park ranger positions for a period of three (3) years. The cost would be shared equally among the five (5) member agencies. This recommendation stems from a previous presentation by the Riverside County Parks and Open Space District, which provided an overview of their Santa Ana River Bottom Collaborative Workgroup and highlighted the need for additional ranger support in an 8-mile stretch of the Santa Ana River corridor.

Currently, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District (Valley District) funds four (4) rangers, one maintenance worker, and a portion of a manager's time to manage their own mitigation areas within the river corridor. These areas support habitat restoration efforts related to a regional Habitat Conservation Plan, which involves several of the member agencies. The proposed ranger positions would extend patrol and management coverage to the broader area managed by Riverside County Parks, addressing site cleanup, homeless outreach, coordination with partner agencies, invasive species management (such as Arundo Donax), public safety, and support for biological monitoring.

The annual cost of one ranger is approximately \$180,000, which would amount to \$36,000 per year for each agency if the cost is split in five ways. Over a three-year period, the cost per agency would total about \$108,000 for one ranger, or \$216,000 for two. These expenses are not currently included in SAWPA's adopted two-year budget but could be accommodated with justification.

Funding these positions would provide direct benefits to the member agencies by improving habitat conditions, enhancing safety along the Santa Ana River Trail, supporting key water monitoring infrastructure, and ensuring continuous ranger coverage in the entire 8-mile area. Riverside County Parks has expressed a need for additional staffing capacity due to past budget constraints and increasing operational demands.

Commissioner Botello inquired about breaking down the safety benefits of having rangers in the watershed in more detail.

Mr. Achimore noted that there's data showing 165 encampments, although it's a couple of years old, many of these encampments are still present. The key safety point is that if an encampment is removed, a continued presence along the river is necessary because, as Riverside County Parks and their partners have noted, encampments often return. Each time an encampment reappears, it requires a renewed effort to establish contact with those involved and to clean up the site.

In discussions with Valley District, they view funding for rangers as a valuable long-term investment in maintaining this ongoing presence. While there are multiple tributaries and specific hotspots, they emphasize the need for broad, continuous coverage of the entire area. Open spaces like this require a comprehensive approach to ensure safety and prevent recurring issues.

Riverside County Parks is a strong safety partner because they have established relationships with other county agencies, such as mental health services, fire departments, and other essential resources. Their ability to coordinate with these agencies enhances the overall management of open space and helps address the complex safety issues that come with large, accessible areas.

Commissioner Botello noted that as we anticipate expanding the work of OWOW and the Task Forces within the watershed, it's important to recognize that habitat restoration is a shared responsibility. While Valley District is taking the lead in many of the restoration efforts, all of us depend on the permitting and mitigation that come from those efforts. This is a collaborative, ongoing process that spans the entire watershed, and it's crucial for ensuring the health and sustainability of the ecosystem across both the upper and lower watershed.

Given this, there's value of having rangers in the watershed. Rangers play a vital role in supporting and protecting the ongoing work of OWOW and Task Forces and all the agencies involved in restoration. Their presence provides not just safety and security, but also continuity ensuring that the efforts being made at the upper watershed can be continued and supported all the way downstream.

Mr. Achimore noted that this area of the river is important because it contains perennial water, which creates a unique connection between the various projects and interests of the member agencies and other water agencies. A significant factor uniting this region is the need to mitigate the impacts of water resource projects. To do this effectively, open space and habitat restoration are essential components to offset the environmental effects of these projects. The work being done is critical for habitat conservation that aligns with the mitigation requirements for these water projects. Additionally, it's worth noting that all involved agencies are working with the same federal agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the same regional water quality board. This shared regulatory oversight further binds the member agencies and strengthens the collaborative approach to managing the watershed.

Commissioner Paule inquired about SAWPA's assets in the area, specifically in terms of physical infrastructure. Does the Brine Line fall under the area? Mr. Achimore noted that the Brine Line does not cross the river in this area, nor do any of SAWPA's hard assets. The land that SAWPA owns is located closer to the Colton area and downstream near Prado, there are none in this specific area of the river.

Commissioner Hall appreciated all the positive aspects and the benefits, and asked Mr. Achimore to outline some of the risks and potential liabilities associated with having a ranger in place.

Mr. Achimore stated that he would need to follow-up on the specific liability details regarding having a ranger in the area and what that would mean for SAWPA. An agreement would be put in place with certain liability protections included, but he'll need to confirm the specifics.

Commissioner Bilodeau reported that OCWD owns miles of open space along the Santa Ana River and spends hundreds of thousands of dollars on private security services to prevent homeless encampments from establishing residency along those rights-of-way. They work closely with the City of Anaheim, City of Orange, the Orange County Sheriff's Department, and Huntington Beach Police Department to keep encampments from forming.

That said, OCWD would not support funding the policing of open spaces in Riverside County. Managing these efforts is a responsibility that falls under the Riverside County Parks Department and the Riverside County Sheriff's Department. All of us struggle with managing homeless encampments, and if we start funding efforts outside our own jurisdiction, particularly in other counties, it could become unmanageable. This is a constant challenge one that can be managed but not fully resolved.

Alternate Commissioner Dennstedt asked how many rangers Riverside is currently funding for this area. Are the rangers directly involved in removing Arundo? How do you track the effectiveness of the work, as mentioned in the slides from earlier? And, most importantly, is this funding already included as a line item in SAWPA's current budget?

Mr. Achimore reported that this item is currently not in the approved budget since the budget was approved in April. As for Arundo removal, from discussions with Riverside, it's not their primary focus. The rangers do provide patrol and establish a presence in the area before the biologists go out to actually perform the removal. Regarding how many rangers are patrolling the 8-mile area, it's just the Valley District rangers, but can confirm.

For metrics and deliverables, we would ask Riverside to provide detailed reports as part of their invoicing, which would be either monthly or bi-monthly. Staff would request information such as: How many instances of certain activities occurred? How many hours were spent patrolling the 8-mile area during that period? These details would be part of the regular invoicing and reporting process.

Alternate Commissioner Dennstedt noted that the Sheriff's Department has a homeless outreach team that actively works in the area, and code enforcement also plays a significant role in outreach and cleanup efforts as part of the county's funding. I believe managing these efforts falls squarely within the responsibility of those agencies, and I wouldn't want to interfere with their work.

Rangers, on the other hand, have a specific job role and scope of services that they provide, which is how the public perceives them and interacts with them. I'm not sure this aligns with the broader messaging of what we need to achieve in terms of homeless outreach.

This is just a general comment from my perspective, having worked closely with the Sheriff's Department and code enforcement on homelessness issues. These are clearly within their jurisdiction, and they are typically very focused on handling them independently. In fact, they sometimes prefer not to collaborate with other agencies in this area.

Alternate Commissioner Harrison noted that the rangers are working closely with the Sheriff's Department and various Riverside and San Bernardino County agencies. This is a coordinated effort, not a solo operation. They've removed over 100 encampments, including vehicles and debris. Their presence acts as a deterrent and strengthens community relationships. The rangers are employed by Riverside County Parks, with full support and coordination from other agencies, and their efforts have been highly effective.

Commissioner Hall emphasized that she's in full support because the rangers serve as a strong deterrent. Their regular presence in the area helps prevent new encampments from forming. When individuals do attempt to set up camps, the rangers are able to engage with them, build trust, and guide them toward better alternatives. For these reasons, she's in favor of accepting staff's recommendation.

Chair Gardner asked if the rangers have any enforcement authority off county parks property? Mr. Achimore noted the 8-mile area isn't entirely owned by Riverside County Parks or the county itself. The land is actually owned by the state of California, with a 50-year maintenance and management agreement in place, which gives them enforcement authority over it. There are also other areas within this space, including some city-owned properties

Chair Gardner shared that three years ago, SAWPA conducted a study on the impact of the homeless population on water quality in the Santa Ana River. The study found that the impact was minimal. At that time, large encampments, such as those near Anaheim Stadium, were still in place, and the program we have now didn't exist. There were likely more encampments in the river than compared to now. He expressed concerns about using SAWPA funds for this effort being that it's not SAWPA's role. SAWPA doesn't own or manage any resources in this area. If the goal is to improve water quality, the wild pigs, according to the SAWPA study, have a bigger impact on water quality than the people, their animals, and the debris they bring, and there's definitely a lot of debris and it does not fall under SAWPA's responsibility.

Karen Williams informed the Commission that this isn't included in the current budget, and there are no funds for it now. If this passes, SAWPA would need to bill the agencies individually for the additional costs for the next two years. Starting in the third year, it would be included in the member agency contributions, and it would be added to the budget then.

Commissioner Bilodeau stated that OCWD will not fund this activity. It's simply not within the scope of their water districts. The responsibility falls to the County of Riverside and the Riverside County Parks Department, as they receive property tax revenue for this purpose. He understands it's a tough situation, and we all face challenges, but funding homeless services and security in Riverside County is not something OCWD should be taking on, their ratepayers would not support it.

MOVED, to authorize funding for two Riverside County Regional Park and Open-Space District (RivCo Parks) Ranger positions for a period of three years, with costs shared equally among the five member agencies.

Result:	Failed by Roll Call Vote (2-3)
Motion/Second:	Hall/Botello
Ayes:	Botello, Hall
Nays:	Bilodeau, Gardner, Paule
Abstentions:	None
Absent:	None

B. REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS FOR STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT (CM#2025.72)

Karen Williams provided a presentation titled SAWPA Strategic Plan Request for Proposals (RFP), contained in the agenda packet on pages 135-145.

Ms. Williams provided a brief overview of SAWPA's last adopted strategic plan in 2011, with an update in 2016. Since that time, there have been changes in commission leadership, evolving water management challenges, and shifting regional priorities. As a result, a comprehensive redevelopment of the strategic plan is needed.

The purpose of the RFP is to engage member agencies, stakeholders, and staff in establishing a set of shared goals. This process will reaffirm or redefine SAWPA's mission,

vision, and values, identify strategic priorities, and set measurable goals for SAWPA, including the brine line.

The scope of work for the project includes a project kickoff and work plan, stakeholder engagement (which will involve discussions with the Commission, General Managers, staff, and other partners as necessary), and a review of SAWPA's mission, vision, and values. It will also involve setting strategic goals and priorities, as well as developing an implementation and monitoring framework.

Additionally, the final strategic plan will be delivered in both PDF and editable formats, along with a final presentation. The proposed schedule for the RFP process is subject to approval and is expected to be released today. If interviews are required, they will be conducted by December 1st, and the Commission will consider awarding the contract on December 16th. Evaluation criteria for proposals will include experience with similar projects, understanding SAWPA's needs and approach, cost, and the overall value of the proposed services.

Ms. Williams noted that the RFP has been reviewed by the General Managers, and their feedback has been incorporated. The recommendation is for the Commission to authorize SAWPA to issue the RFP for the strategic plan development. There was no discussion.

MOVED, to authorize staff to issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) for Strategic Plan Development.

Result:	Adopted by Roll Call Vote
Motion/Second:	Hall/Botello
Ayes:	Bilodeau, Botello, Gardner, Hall, Paule
Nays:	None
Abstentions:	None
Absent:	None

C. SAWPA 50th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION – PROPOSED PROJECTS (CM#2025.73)

Karen Williams provided a presentation titled SAWPA 50th Anniversary Celebrating Five Decades of Watershed Collaboration, contained in the agenda packet on pages 177-188.

This year marks SAWPA's 50th anniversary, and while the planning is a bit behind schedule, staff is excited to celebrate the significant milestone. The purpose of the celebration is to honor SAWPA's 50 years of legacy, recognize key achievements over the decades, and share a vision for the future.

Some of the key components of the celebration include the creation of a commemorative book and e-book, which will cover SAWPA's history, key events, and milestones, along with a timeline and photographs. Staff is also planning to produce a 10-15 minute anniversary video, which will feature archival footage and interviews with key people, including commissioners. Additionally, staff is considering hosting a luncheon event to premiere the video and distribute the commemorative book.

For the commemorative book, a detailed outline has been provided, which includes an overview of SAWPA's history, and a timeline of significant events. The book will be organized by decade, beginning with the origins of SAWPA in 1969 and the agreement that formed the organization. Each decade will highlight key milestones such as the construction of the brine line in the 1980s, innovative partnerships in the 1990s, grant funding initiatives in the 2000s, the launch of OWOW in 2010, and key accomplishments in the 2020s. The book will conclude with reflections from current and past members of SAWPA and a look toward the future.

Similarly, the anniversary video will follow a similar structure, with a focus on each decade from 1969 through the 2020s, culminating in a closing segment that reflects SAWPA's journey and future vision. The video will be shown during the luncheon event.

Ms. Williams referenced the slide of the anniversary logos designed, and seek'd feedback to determine which design resonates most. The Commission reached a consensus in favor of option C. One suggestion was made to increase the font size of the byline at the bottom, which reads "Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority," so it stands out more clearly.

The proposed timeline is to finalize the content and select vendors for the commemorative book and video by the end of October. Separate committees have already been formed for each project, and initial meetings have taken place. Quotes for the video have been received, and staff is ready to begin bringing in consultants for both the video and the book.

Ms. Williams mentioned that commissioners may be asked if they'd like to participate in the anniversary video. A script is included in the packet with suggested lines for commissioners. The video will aim to feature current and possibly past commissioners, General Managers, and other key figures from SAWPA's history, depending on availability.

There was a suggestion to identify the longest-serving commissioner who is still active or available to participate, as it would be meaningful to include them in the process.

Commissioner Botello highlighted the significance of celebrating SAWPA's 50th anniversary, recognizing it as a major milestone for the organization. The 50th anniversary provides an opportunity to propose ideas that not only acknowledge past accomplishments but also set a hopeful and forward-looking tone for SAWPA's future.

Discussion ensued on venue locations for hosting the luncheon. It was noted that holding the anniversary event at the Mission Inn could be a significant cost, and the budget should be reviewed to determine whether additional funds would be required to cover the expenses. Alternative venues were suggested, including locations that are more affordable, such as Citrus Heritage Park, Crestmore Manor, or March Field Air Museum. Staff were encouraged to research a range of potential venues, considering both the costs and available catering options, and to provide the Commission with a breakdown of the estimated costs. Another suggestion was to consider utilizing the front parking lot and highlighting the green area.

It was concluded that staff have received directions to move forward with the proposed plan and to report back with updates when ready. No formal action was taken on this agenda item.

7. INFORMATIONAL REPORTS

Recommendation: Receive for Information.

A. COMMUNICATIONS REPORT

Presenter: Karen Williams

B. GENERAL MANAGER REPORT

Karen Williams informed the Commission that the OWOW Steering Committee will be attending a tour of the Orange County Regional PFAS Groundwater Treatment Program and the Groundwater Replenishment System Expansion. Lo Tan from the Orange County Water District will be leading the tour, and Ms. Williams extended the invitation to the Commissioners. Staff are currently working to finalize the dates for the tours and will provide further details once they are confirmed.

C. CHAIR'S COMMENTS/REPORT

There were no Chair comments received.

D. COMMISSIONERS' COMMENTS

There were no Commissioners' comments received.

E. COMMISSIONERS' REQUEST FOR FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

There were no requests for future agenda items.

Chair Gardner recessed the meeting at 10:25 a.m. for Closed Session.

8. CLOSED SESSION

A. THREAT TO PUBLIC SERVICES OR FACILITIES

Consultation with Thomas S. Bunn, Commission General Counsel

9. CLOSED SESSION REPORT

Chair Gardner resumed the Open Session at 11:07 a.m. and Legal Counsel, Thomas S. Bunn announced that the Commission received a report from Counsel; no reportable action was taken on Agenda Item No. 8.A.

10. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business for review, Chair Gardner adjourned the meeting at 11:08 a.m.

Approved at a Regular Meeting of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority Commission on Tuesday, October 21, 2025.

Signed by:

Mike Gardner

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Mike Gardner, Chair

Attest:

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Sara Villa

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Sara Villa, Clerk of the Board