Interview of Conner Everts
UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles
Interview of Conner Everts

Transcript

Session One (November 25, 2014)

COLLINGS:

So today is November 25th, 2014, Jane Collings interviewing Conner Everts here at the Young Research Library. Why don't we start off by hearing when and where you were born.

EVERTS:

Sure, Jane. I was actually born in London, England, but I grew up not far from UCLA in one of the canyons, Benedict Canyon.

COLLINGS:

Benedict Canyon?

EVERTS:

Yeah, when it was still a more rural place. So I grew up with a lot of land around us, very few houses, and kind of that interface between chaparral and an urban area about three and a half miles away.

COLLINGS:

What would you like to say about your family that you grew up in?

00:01:59

EVERTS:

So I grew up with a family of artists and writers, so I think that gave me a sense that anything is possible, and while I don't have their same creative skills, they gave me a lot of freedom. I loved fishing, and I grew up fishing in Malibu Creek, where I discovered there was steelhead trout which go out to the ocean and come back in the remnant population of the origin of the species, which played into my water world later in life. We spent a lot of time traveling in a big old Mercury station wagon, so I got to see a lot of places, and it gave me a greater sense of not only my local sense of place, but California and ultimately Central America and Mexico too. So that gave me, I think, a pretty broad perspective, and I was glad to have it.

I think artists look at the world a little bit differently. So I grew up with a stepfather who was a writer and a mother who's an artist, and then my father, whose name I share, was a well-known artist and professor, and then his father he talks about, who I just met when I was very young. And his father grew up fishing in Southern California, so he caught salmon in Newport Bay, which were still there. He caught steelhead, cutthroat trout, which I haven't seen in these waters, but there were then, and would remember places like Lincoln Boulevard going through which is now the Playa Vista Development, which would flood regionally and you'd have to go all the way around and all the way up to the area of La Cienega.

I grew up playing on those reservoir courts. It's a reservoir because Cienega means watershed, you know, a wet area, and that area historically used to be wet. So I would hear stories of before UCLA there were lima beans growing here and what crops were in Southern California, as we have very little of any of that left. I ended up spending a lot of time in the town of Ojai, where my grandmother lived and which still has agriculture. Years later, I ended up back there and ran for the local Water Board, and that was part of my water history too. So my family played that part, and some of their friends and connections did as well.

COLLINGS:

So all of that outdoor stuff really ended up shaping things.

EVERTS:

It had a big influence on me, yeah. I left Southern California for the East Coast. My grandmother was good friends with a well-known author at the time in the seventies, Helen Nearing. Helen and Scott Nearing had written about fifty books, but a series that they wrote about going back to the land. It predated a movement that happened in the seventies, but they went out in the forties and fifties, moved to Vermont, wrote a book on maple sugaring, the book called Living the Good Life, and then they moved to the coast of Maine. She and my grandmother used to switch a gallon of maple syrup for a gallon of olive oil, coast to coast. And I ended up going there and working with them, working at their Social Science Institute when I was quite young, and that kind of got my start in doing environmental issues.

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's very interesting. So you went out to the Social Science Institute. It was in Vermont then?

EVERTS:

It had actually moved from Vermont. In the fifties they decided--and they built stone houses. That's the other thing. As non-stone masons, they figured out a simple way to build with native materials. New England is filled with rocks and stone walls, and the soil is filled with rocks. They were early organic farmers. They saw that Vermont was going to become a vacationing paradise for skiers and others, which eventually it did to some degree, and so early on, they went to the coast of Maine below Bangor, not far from Bar Harbor and Arcadia National Park, an area of the Penobscot Bay.

COLLINGS:

I know that area.

00:06:3100:08:18

EVERTS:

Actually, Helen took up plumb bob, which is what you use to find a straight line, carpenters use, and she held it above a map and went to this spot on the coast called Cape Rosier, and went to the local farmer and said, "You have a lovely place. I've heard it's for sale," because she had heard the rumor people would go and he'd agree to sell it, and when they came back, he'd refused. Well, she had just sold her place. Actually, I think she gave it to Pearl Buck, but she had some cash and she just moved there. So she literally took out cash when he said he'd sell it. They ended up living there for the rest of their lives.

Scott lived to be 100 years old, was well known for his once-radical views. He was in the movie Reds with Warren Beatty as one of those elder radicals who gives their testimony to John Reed and the history of those times. He and Helen lived there. At that time, people were just--they were far what they called "down east" up the coast, and people would just show up. So some days, twenty or thirty people would show up for lunch. We actually spent the summer and ran the Social Science Institute for part of the winter, and then I moved from there to New Hampshire, where I ran an energy and water office. We had a rare time in New England where it didn't rain for a few weeks. It was 1977, '78.

We drew from California and Oregon that had a drought, because when it didn't rain and people naturally draw from the river, they had emptied their reservoirs. So for a short while we had serious drought and we ran industrial programs, and that really got my start in water, although I was doing renewables, hydroelectric, solar, and efficiency issues, because heating oil had gone from 19 cents a gallon to $1.23. New Hampshire is perhaps known for its not having any sales tax, income tax, or social services. So we had old Yankees now freezing to death in their big old houses and people converting to woodstoves en masse, about 75 percent, and potentially burning down their houses. So we ran safety programs and insulation programs and all kinds of local social services from a municipal level.

Then I went from there to Washington, D.C., where I ran a national program on saving water and energy. Then I ended up back actually in Ojai. My grandmother passed away. I was here at UCLA Hospital. I got very sick and I ended up staying. I went back to Vermont for a little while, but I ended up coming back to California, where I started doing energy and then eventually, in the eighties, just water work. So I worked for municipalities and engineering firms and nonprofits and, I guess, state and local and federal governments, almost all elements, as a consultant of what they call the water world or what we like to call the hydrological brotherhood made up of those who are a small circle of people working with the water industry, but then it's recently expanded to be more than that too.

COLLINGS:

So when you first got involved with this and you went out to Maine and you were with the Social Science Institute, what was the cultural context for this? Would you say that it was part of the counterculture and precursor to the counterculture, sort of Left politics or was it--

00:10:30

EVERTS:

So the Nearings were definitely from a progressive Left politics. He had been kicked out of one School of Economics for advocating child labor laws in 1917 and had been kicked out of the Communist Party and had lived as an independent thinker. The winter we ran the Social Science Institute, I think they went to--they had early access to go to China and the Soviet Union. I think they were actually in Albania. But they also spent their winters doing writing and research for their books, and they were in the libraries of Boston and New York City, where they did a lot, spent time as well.

So it was definitely a time of kind of--so it was the early seventies, so it was after the counterculture wars and battles. And I'm thinking, you know, we're sitting here today and there's been race riots overnight. And that was a time when there was a lot of turmoil and riots and war, assassinations, and so a lot of people had decided to move out into rural areas and try to establish a life there and live a little independently of all that, which the Nearings had done two generations before, and that's why they attracted a lot of people who came to visit them. And the idea was being able to build your own home, grow your own food. I thought California in 1970, '71, fuel prices were going to go too high, housing was going to be too high, water was going to be a limited resource, and I was probably about thirty or forty years too early on those predictions. Or it's continued to happen ever since then, really.

COLLINGS:

Yes, it has.

EVERTS:

So that was my idea, but I was probably much younger than a lot of the people that were doing that.

COLLINGS:

And how old were you at the time?

EVERTS:

Like nineteen or twenty, a few years of college. So I realized I didn't have something to leave yet so much. So I ended up running the Claremont [phonetic] Energy Project, and then ended up working for HUD, Housing and Urban Development, in D.C., and doing these energy and water workshops around the country in each of the HUD regions and then coming back to California and doing solar renewable work and water and energy efficiency.

COLLINGS:

So it sounds like certainly in the beginning with the time in Vermont that it was kind of a sense of building systems apart from the mainstream society where--

EVERTS:

Or as an example of how you could live on less.

COLLINGS:

As an example, yeah.

EVERTS:

Or how you could leave self-sufficiently without being so dependent in an urban setting, although in the end, I end up in an urban setting because I see that this is really--if you can reduce within an urban setting, it's a good example for other places as well.

COLLINGS:

Were you subject to the draft at all at that time?

EVERTS:

So, yeah, I was in Berkeley. We had a draft lottery, and all my friends pulled in the 300s, and I was number 23. And I probably would have been drafted, but I think the year--it was right at the end of the cycle, so I ended up getting a conscientious-objector status.

COLLINGS:

Oh, you did?

EVERTS:

My grandmother, who worked with an Indian philosopher, Krishnamurti, put me in touch with some Quakers that helped me work on it. I literally locked myself in a room for a week or so and worked on that. I was prepared to move to Canada, where I had family, because I honestly didn't

believe in not only the Vietnam War, but in war in general. And I think I only got it because I didn't have real religious background.

COLLINGS:

You only got it because you didn't have real religious background?

EVERTS:

No, I think I only got it because it was the very end, it was the very last year that they were actually going through the draft and pulling people up to--I think 142 or something was the number, the dropoff number. And I think I probably wouldn't have been able to get it without a serious religious background before that. My grandfather was a Roman Catholic bishop who lived in the Vatican, left the church, met my six-foot-tall grandmother, who was much younger, I think in Australia, where she was traveling with an Indian philosopher who she worked for starting a school in Ojai, named Krishnamurti.

So Helen Nearing, my connection with the Nearings was with her at that time. They both married famous older men and lived out their lives like that. So that was another access point. So I was not subject to the draft. The draft was just ending. The war was winding down. But I felt committed to what I never got to do, and I would have as a conscientious objector, was alternative service. So I figured the things I was doing had some sense of service, and that kind of helped shape how I viewed my professional life for a long time, whether I was working for a municipal utility. One in Burbank was called public--literally called--it used to be called public service department. I worked for nonprofits or for the federal government, even.

COLLINGS:

And where did you attend school when you were growing up here in L.A.?

EVERTS:

So the local schools?

COLLINGS:

Mm-hmm.

EVERTS:

So we had a forty-minute bus ride up and down the canyons, picking up people, and I went to Warner Avenue Elementary, which is--

COLLINGS:

Just right down the street here.

EVERTS:

Yeah, a quarter of a mile from here. Then I went to Emerson Junior High School.

COLLINGS:

Okay, also down the street from here.

EVERTS:

Also close, on the back side of the Mormon Temple. I remember the barbed-wire fences to keep us out. Then I went to University High School, went for a couple of years. Obviously, I got out quickly. Then I went to school--I went up north. But I was part of--to me, Los Angeles changing from a lot of open space, which people don't always realize.

I grew up in fishing a creek in wilderness, deep in Malibu Creek, or when I was in Ojai, you could hike up to the Sespe Creek behind the Topatopa Mountains or Malibu Creek, where I caught huge big steelhead underneath a dam that I'm still trying to remove so the fish could get upstream and spawn. I grew up on the beach and swimming and diving in the kelp beds, so I had a strong sense of nature even in the urban area, and I think my sense of fishing, which I always grew up doing in Southern California and other places, gave me a connection to nature which drove my work on how do we save water and how do we save water just not for people, but for the environment and for fish. And that's probably what's led to this long career.

COLLINGS:

Right. Right. Let's talk about what's happened here in the L.A. context. We've touched a little bit on sort of what brought you to--was the Southern California Watershed Alliance the first major involvement here in the L.A. area in--

EVERTS:

In terms of water?

COLLINGS:

Yeah.

EVERTS:

No, I was actually--let's see. I was in law school and working for water utilities before I started the Watershed Alliance. I'd worked for the Burbank Municipal Water Utility, and then I worked for Pasadena, but then in the interim, I moved to Ojai. Pasadena was a short-term drought consulting job during the '86 to '91 drought, but the drought continued and I continued to commute. I ran three shifts in Pasadena. Burbank wasn't really interested in doing serious conservation.

I don't know why they hired me. When the general manager, after three or four months, called me up to his office and said, "You've done a thousand energy and water audits and you're running all these programs. Why are you doing that?" He said, "I think conservation is just handing out comic books and doing PR." And my comment was, "Well, then why did you hire me?" And at that point, I realized, one, I no longer lived--even living in Westwood and driving to Burbank was tough, but at that time I had moved to Ojai. I realized if they weren't committed to it, it didn't make sense for me to be there, so that's why I left.

COLLINGS:

So what year was that in Burbank? What years was that?

EVERTS:

Eighty-seven, '88.

COLLINGS:

Would you consider that to be an attitude of that time, that conservation is just handing out comic books?

00:21:51

EVERTS:

I think that's still an attitude within the water industry, because water is often seen as a commodity, and reducing demand or demand-site management isn't fully seen as a supply. I think I still am very involved in that fight between reducing demand and the benefits of that, in terms of supply options like dams or ocean desal or things that don't make sense when you haven't done all you can on the other side. So I don't that attitude has changed; I think it's masked a little bit better. I don't think people would say that as directly, but at that time it was clear.

They have a beautiful old utility building that provides its own power on site, but it used to be independent of both power and water because it could produce water from wells. But Lockheed was there and there's industrial pollution, so they've lost their local groundwater, so they now have to purchase water. So when I walked out, I'd become good friends with the people I worked with, about three hundred employees, because one of my other jobs as a conservation person, who weren't allowed just to do conservation, so I was charge of PR, I was in charge of carpooling and transportation for three hundred people, so I had to get them to work and make sure they could get home.

I was in charge of recycling for the utility and energy and water conservation. And I had one summer intern who they had buried in the basement going through old bills, and who actually walked in my office and said, "This looks like more fun." I think she was only fifteen. She ended up going to law school, an Armenian woman, and we did a lot of work, the two of us. So when I walked out of the utility after I played for their softball team, they knew I'd spoken up and stood up to the general manager, they all clapped and cheered, and I went home to Ojai.

Then I got called back to Pasadena, where we did a real conservation program, and then we were in the midst of a drought, and that really allowed me to see if you had support for a program from management. We saved 27 percent of their water usage. I had a staff of seventeen. So we were really going after water savings in a way that I really haven't seen in this last drought we're in now.

COLLINGS:

So we're talking about late eighties. You're in Burbank. What are the ways that you--

EVERTS:

I'm in Ojai now.

COLLINGS:

I thought you were working in Burbank.

00:23:55

EVERTS:

I worked in Burbank, moved to Ojai, went to Pasadena while living in Ojai, and finally when the March miracle came and the drought was officially over in winter of '91, I ended up going back to Ojai and ended up running for the local water district, Casitas Municipal Water District, and becoming president of a groundwater agency, which there was only seven of in the whole State of California, because we don't have groundwater regulation.

That got to be very interesting, because I went from being someone who was a commuter and not in town much, to someone who was interacting with farmers and everybody else. And wells in California are like gun control, so when we got farmers to put meters on their wells, they broke the windows in my house and my car. Even though at that time I was living in an orchard and had grapefruit and stuff, it was almost as colloquial as New England, they didn't think of me as a local. But after we did public process and pulled back a little, they put the meters in and realized they were real tools and that we could manage our groundwater, because that was the only supply we had. That was an interesting experience for four years.

I ran for reelection. I didn't allow waterskiing and jet skis on our reservoir, which people wanted--it's very hot in Ojai in the summertime--because it's a drinking source. Unlike the East Coast, where they keep boats and stuff out, we do the opposite here. So I didn't get reelected, and then I came back. So we're now probably into the nineties, into the early nineties.

COLLINGS:

Well, let me just backtrack a little bit. So when you were proposing water conservation ideas in Burbank and having trouble with it, what were the kinds of things that you were proposing at that time?

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EVERTS:

So the things that you would do as a conservation coordinator, whether it's drought or not, is take the top 100 water users. I just got a call on my way here from the Center for Investigative Reporting, and they were asking, "Do you know where we can find those top 100 water users for the state?" And I said, "Well, it's proprietary information, unfortunately, but you could probably figure it out by category."

So for the city of Burbank, and most cities, it's often the city itself. The municipal utility was using water for cooling the power plant, they had golf courses and parks, and then they had certain industries that were high water users, including tourist industries and hotels. The studios even use more water than we realize. So we targeted all those. We went after them. We found solutions for them. We also did residential programs and institutional programs for the schools. We dealt with leak control.

So we weren't able to implement all of those. We did more audits than implementation in Burbank, but when I got to Pasadena, we were actually able to run all those programs. So that included at that time we were beginning to take all the old five-to seven-gallon toilets and replace them with--we were down to 1.6, called ultra-low-flow toilets, and pay people for that. That was just starting then.

We were also exchanging shower heads and sink aerators and beginning to deal with outdoor landscape and irrigation systems, which are typically old and inefficient and leaking. To some degree, utilities need to take care--and UCLA became aware of this--of old pipes and infrastructures. Those are usually in need of repair and not a focus until they blow up. So even if they are, it's a long process. It's over three hundred years to replace all the pipes in L.A., is their cycle at this point.

COLLINGS:

Three hundred years.

EVERTS:

Seventy-two hundred miles of pipes. So all that put me in an interesting position, because the

other thing, getting back to L.A. and the aqueduct that was happening then, was the battle for Mono Lake and returning the water to the freshwater streams. And the way that was going to happen was through doing urban conservation, and I ended up being part of a very interesting time when we had these statewide water conservation advisory groups that would meet. We had one I won't forget. It was in Bakersfield. The two women at the time, Betsy Reifsnider and Martha Davis, were running the Mono Lake Committee. It was right down here on Westwood Boulevard in a little tiny office. We went to a meeting, and Betsy had brought somebody from a group called Mothers of East L.A.

COLLINGS:

Oh, right. Of course.

EVERTS:

Mothers of East L.A. Mrs. Gutierrez got up and said, in Spanish, she said, "You have programs for rich people and their golf courses, but what do you have for us in the barrio?" And the fellow who translated worked for the Department of Water Resources, and he was Chilean. I remember him being very cautious in his translation, and she kept giving him dirty looks. And those of us who understood Spanish were going, "Come on, say what she's really saying." So then she switched to speaking in English, because she wasn't satisfied with the translation.

And that was the beginning of a program in the nineties that was very successful, that led to 1.47 million toilets, the big old ones, exchanged. The community-based programs, and there ended up being five of them, including First AME Church had one called Adro Environmental, Inc.; two guys spun off and ran that. The Calvary Baptist Church, Community Enhancement Services in Hollywood, and the Asian American Drug Abuse Program, and the Community Youth Center. So they all did the distribution within their own community, so we blanketed all of L.A. and got about 80 percent of the toilets exchanged, which equals real water. Took the old toilets, and so slum lords wouldn't reuse them, they were crushed. At one time Santa Monica was thinking of making a reef with them, but they realized the porcelain was sharp and divers could [unclear].

COLLINGS:

It's used now for roadwork.

00:31:44

EVERTS:

Road aggregate underneath. It's used as gravel, broken up, and then it won't be reused. And they took the brass and other stuff out of the tanks and recycled them. We were very active in what was appliance standards, in getting those shifted to plumbing codes so that's all you could buy, and getting rid of the old ones. That was a very successful program, and that's why L.A. can say since 1978 water demand has been flat with 1.4 million more people, and now in the last few years we've dropped and we're down to about 20 percent. Now it's around 16 percent. It's varied a little bit.

But that program really set the standard for citywide savings, and I was happy to be a part of that, working with the Mono Lake Committee, testifying at the State Water Resource Control Board. Here at UCLA, I think, was actually one of the hearings on restoring the freshwater flows and the Public Trust Doctrine being applied for trout, actually. When you look at Mono Lake, you see kind of a moonscape with the tufas rising out of the saline water, but at one time, if you look at the old historic pictures, there were beautiful big cottonwood trees and freshwater creeks before L.A. diverted them. Rush Creek and Lee Vining Creek were feeding a natural system up there that doesn't exist anymore, and we've replanted the trees and tried to establish it.

We're slowly seeing water levels come back up, but then we have drought and water levels go back down. One year, '95, when we finally won that battle, Martha Davis and I and the people for sixteen years who have been doing a bike ride, went from LADWP, where we scooped up water out of the reflecting pool, put it in test tubes, took a tape and taped it to our bike tubes, and the names of the community groups that saved water. Six days later, 366 miles, 12,500 feet of climb, we returned that water symbolically to Mono Lake, and that was another kind of historic moment for me personally to be able to do that bike ride and to be with those people doing it.

And the response we got from people, from a church in Bishop that put us up, let us sleep out in their yard and made pancakes for us at five-thirty in the morning so we could go off riding the next day, people would honk and wave, and we were on radio shows for the Owens Valley, where water in L.A. and land had been a battle for 100 years. We were seen as local heroes, and it was a lot of fun having that interaction and getting to see it at the pace you would ride a bike on Labor Day weekend across the heat and then eventually--normally you would get cold up into Mammoth.

We'd ride up into Mammoth the last night, but it was still warm the time I went, too, and then down to Mono Lake, because that's where historically a major portion of our water came from. So I'd worked with the Mono Lake Committee, and I still do, in making that connection. Fortunately, the community-based organizations that did such a good job, they kind of had a hero at LADWP, water resources manager Jerry Gewe , who was the water general manager. When he

retired and when these programs wound down, you know, they were successful. They didn't get them going up again to do the outdoor watering, which is the next big thing. So I'm still trying to get them back in and maneuver. So there's that opportunity, because then it becomes economic development. They become a delivery mechanism, and it connects the city, and saving water reaches all parts of the city.

COLLINGS:

Well, it seems like the toilet exchange, there are so many elements that allow it to be successful. As I understand it, the word started going out among community members that you could really reduce your water bill this way. So this huge incentive on the part of individuals--

EVERTS:

They trusted the community organizations that were doing it.

COLLINGS:

Right.

EVERTS:

If DWP had come out and done it with door hangers, people would have ignored it because they didn't trust them. So there was that level of trust, yeah.

COLLINGS:

The community groups, you had the incentive on the parts of the individuals, and then you had something that is so simple once you implement it, you're going to see, as you said--

EVERTS:

A permanent change, yeah.

COLLINGS:

--a permanent and big change. So it's really a wonderful success story.

EVERTS:

And now it's been twenty years. Those toilets have been superseded by high-efficiency toilets at 1.2. We have dual-flush toilets. We have other options out there. And quite frankly, when they mass-produced all those toilets, toilets were cheap then. We could get them for--in the exchange, I think people gave up a rebate to have it installed. I think it was $75, and that was about the price of the toilet too. So plumbers were getting paid to do the work, smart ones from Santa Monica got to retire to Hawaii, right, because they were able to do a whole lot of work in a short period of time.

But now toilets are far more expensive, but the flapper valves that go inside the tanks begin to wear out on some of those toilets, and I think there's an opportunity there to replace all those toilets, which is probably the simplest, or exchange all the flapper valves, because those are kind of silent leaks that are happening all the time, and that's a lot of water. Since we use drinking water from mountains, treat it to flush toilets, it doesn't make any sense, there's an opportunity to do that whole kind of exchange again, I think. But we're not getting the response from the city and the utility we did back then when it really became a movement.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. Well, it had all of the perfect pieces. Is there another similar kind of big fix that can be brought into play here aside from what one DWP person said at the Just Add Water talks that were happening at the Natural History Museum? Pricing incentives, meaning, "We'll charge more"?

00:37:29

EVERTS:

That might work for the utility. It might not work for all the people, certainly not the people in a lot of the communities. I think you should actually price it severely. DWP had a limitation in their billing system where you could only have two tiers, but they did have a summer rate, so you got a heavy penalty. There were some gaps there that could be used, but certainly to the west of us in Brentwood, above us in Bel Air, those communities probably may not even write the checks for their water bills directly and are willing to pay high amounts, and other communities where water can be a percentage of their actual income or they may be paying for it out of their rent and not have any direct benefit from saving water, unfortunately. Those need to change. But the other big areas that we see to save water in that could involve community groups is certainly this wave that's happening with tearing out turf and lawns and replacing it with native landscape, changing out the irrigation. We also see an opportunity for graywater systems, so you're actually capturing everything but your toilet and kitchen sink, and either just filtering or laying that water either underground or distribute it. You can do that.

There are cisterns to be distributed. I went last year to Australia to try to figure out how they survived a thirteen-year drought, of our six-year drought, and how they reduced their per capita to a fraction of what we use. They use thirty to fifty gallons per day per person. L.A.'s at 123. Santa Monica, that used to be much better, is at 131. Long Beach is one of the better at 107. But we have a long ways to go. In the drought, we're beginning to see communities like Santa Cruz get down to 68, and others have to go lower because they just don't have other water sources.

But the other big area besides the outside is something we failed at in the nineties, which is recycled water, which is taking wastewater like they've been doing in Orange County, fully treating it. They now call it advanced treatment. And then letting it filter through the ground in a long timeframe of three to five years before it's brought back up and treated again. So because of that, Orange County has been able to maintain their groundwater, while we in Los Angeles and San Fernando Valley where it became a political issue--

COLLINGS:

Mm-hmm, the Toilet to Tap.

00:39:2400:41:3000:42:5900:44:5000:46:42

EVERTS:

--which was coined by the very city councilman, Joel Wachs, who voted for the project. We paid for the project. All it needed--it still just needs a valve to be turned, which I'd like to do one night at midnight. We could be using it right now in the drought, and it could go back in the ground, because our groundwater resources are diminishing. We're not measuring them. We know they're polluted. We're shutting down wells when we should be putting in stormwater and recycled water. So that's the next big opportunity for a large volume of water, along with the outdoor water usage, but I don't think we're done with having to increase the efficiency of appliances and toilets. We've done it with washing machines.

I was at a meeting in [unclear] with Amory Lovins, who is kind of the guru of energy conservation, lived in Mount Washington for a while until he built his Rocky Mountain Institute in Snowmass, Colorado. He had come in from China carrying all these modules and equipment he used many years ago. We were having a meeting in San Francisco at midnight about horizontal-access washing machines, the front loaders, which are now standard, which used 40 percent less water and less energy, and just a movement to make transitions to make appliances more efficient.

And then how do you get those instead of just waiting for it to happen by market forces, how do you actually get those out, and how do you provide incentives, and how do you get the old ones out of circulation like we did with the toilets? And on a commercial level, how can you do that too? So how do you pick out those high-water-usage places and focus on them? For utilities, the challenge has been--we've been successful at that. They make money and get revenue from water-selling, so how do they figure out how to offset water they would be purchasing, which would be more expensive imported water with the water they save? So we called it megawatts on the energy side, Amory Lovins called it, so we kind of need that on the water side, acre-feet, and how do we get the investment we need to continue to do these things, realizing not only is it water that we don't have to purchase, it's energy we don't have to use. Because the single biggest use of electrical energy and about a third of the natural gas is used pumping water over the Tehachapis to Southern California. So everything we do to offset that has real value in terms of natural gas and hydrocarbons and greenhouse gases. So there's multiple benefits to doing these programs.

The same with not letting water run off lawns, because we treat them like rice paddies and flood them, keep the roots high, dump on more fertilizer and rinse that off, and it all goes back down into the creeks and the ocean. If we break that cycle, then we're preventing pollution as well. So how do we calculate all those benefits? Then ultimately what we've seen in Australia, which I started to mention, is that they use what they call tanks and we call cisterns. They have large-scale ones. They went, fortunately for them--and what often happens in California--was from

extreme drought to flood. Our last droughts ended with El NiÃ±o and heavy rainfalls.

If we're prepared, and even when we have rains like we did a few weeks ago--I have a friend who had to import a cistern from Australia. She captured 650 gallons because she had not even an inch of rain, but that much came off. TreePeople up on Mulholland is storing 210 gallons underneath their parking lot. Santa Monica Library in their main library in downtown Santa Monica captures 160,000 gallons off of their rooftop. The new one they just built on Pico is capturing that water and then using it to flush toilets and washing hands, because it's otherwise clean water, and why use fresh water for uses like that?

So we're seeing opportunities and changes. It's just how do we make those changes happen, especially now when we're in the midst of a drought? I don't think I've ever seen so much talk about drought, including media, and so little action at the same time, because we're just not saving. It isn't because there isn't more to save. We just haven't rolled out the programs or incentivized them. We've let them die off. And that's one of the ironies of this time we're in now. They're blowing through all the money for turf replacement.

They've used up--every time they've offered cisterns, even those small 55-gallon drums, which aren't enough in terms of volume, they've sold out of those. So people want to save water, and ultimately people save water and communities save water, not utilities. So any way we can promote that, we'll see results and people will go ahead and do things like disconnect their washing machines, which you can do legally, disconnect their downspouts from the roof, which you didn't use to be able to do. It had to go in the storm drain system. It had to be washed out to sea. Now you can do that and capture and reuse that water. You can put in a landscape meter.

My mother, with her English perennial garden in the San Fernando Valley, who was getting killed in the summertime for her water usage, they assumed--or they still assume--all the water that goes into your house goes back out through your sewer, and your sewer rate can be higher than your water rate. Some years of neglect, Hyperion, where we still dump over 300 million gallons a day sometimes of treated water that could also be used, we're not making use of that.

So you can put in a separate meter for landscape. You subtract the difference between your outdoor water usage, which can be as much as 70 percent, from your water bill. When we did that, DWP got it backwards, and they doubled our bill. They added it. We ended up with an $8,000 bill. It went on for a year. We kept fighting it until I finally mentioned it at City Council saying it's not just for my mother's house. Other people must be having this problem. Then that night, the general manager called me, and within three weeks they had one of their--they flag high bills, and they finally came with a big file like this, and they dropped it by two-thirds.

They adjusted it, because you should get a benefit for these programs. But that kind of investment needs to happen. So we're seeing a whole series of systems. So while the eastern Sierra and the aqueduct is delivering some water but it is way down and has been for a few years, in July of 2011, reservoirs were full, reservoirs were spilling. We had lots of water. We had been in a drought cycle, but when it's dry, we act like it's going to rain. And when it's wet, we don't realize it's going to be dry again, and we don't prepare for that.

And in that way we've let all these resources drop down to the point where I think if it doesn't rain pretty seriously statewide by Christmas, both the Colorado system, where L.A. gets part of its water, especially when we're not getting it from the eastern Sierra, and the State Water Project, which only delivered 5 percent this year, Southern California gets about 30 percent of its water the aqueduct along the 5, that's dropped down with all the storage reservoirs to about 30 percent. Farmers have been hard hit. They've just switched to groundwater, which they've over-pumped.

So our whole system is under a lot of stress right now, and water, in the form of rain, may only alleviate it in the short term if we don't realize we have to reduce demand on our permits. So with climate change, we may continue seeing extremes of both very wet and very dry, and even now it seems like it rains heavily and then nothing for a month. If you get out of the urban green irrigated areas of L.A. and you go up into the Central Coast, where I also work, people's wells are going dry. Or in the Central Valley, where I do environmental justice work, where people have polluted groundwater, the pollution gets worse.

And often because they have shallow domestic wells, the farmers are dropping their wells down a thousand feet and drawing water at a greater level. Their wells were going dry first. So we're actually reaching this dystopian sense of we're going to run out of water and yet we use far more water than other places in the world, and we haven't set any statewide standards for groundwater or for total water usage. So we're asking people to save water, 20 percent, but if you live in places in San Diego where you're using over 500 gallons a day, or Montecito near Santa Barbara--I used to use that much--and you compare it to places like Santa Cruz using 68 gallons a day, you know, what value do you get out of that 20 percent? Maybe we should all be at 100 gallons a day as a set level statewide and have that water budget to live in and deal with the agriculture, which uses 80 percent of our water and doesn't have any real limits at all and isn't metered or measured.

COLLINGS:

Based on your work in the L.A. area and your experience, what do you see as the major impediments to moving forward on this?

EVERTS:

So I think Southern California was built on this illusion that we're almost a tropical place when you look at the plants that we grow that aren't native here, and that we can have lawns that belong in New England, and we can have trees that belong in the Northwest, or birch trees.

People plant gray birch trees, which when I lived in New England that was a shrub that would show up in a swamp, beautiful white birch trees and golden birch trees. But here we're trying to recreate something that isn't appropriate for the area on a large scale. So until people get over that kind of view of what Southern California is, is it this kind of fantasy land or is it someplace we can sustain and live in for a long period of time, and make those major changes in landscape--

COLLINGS:

So you're pointing to the exterior landscape as the largest issue.

00:51:0500:53:08

EVERTS:

User of residential use. What we don't talk about a lot is we do have industrial usages and is the incentive to do the--we call them CII--the commercial, industrial, and institutional water usage, and getting all of those down at the same time. An example of what to do would be what actually Martha Davis, Rich Atwater, who was the general manager at the time, did, as an example, for Mono Lake, which is in West Basin. They take part of Hyperion's discharge of their wastewater, which they were dumping in the ocean as waste, and they move it to a treatment plant for advanced treatment in El Segundo. And you can go there for tours. They treat that water then up to five times, and then they send it to places like a refinery that needs super clean water who will pay more, pay a premium, or the golf course, which is right next door. So examples of fully using all our recycled water, instead of L.A. uses about 1 or 2 percent, it plans to go up to 10 percent, but in the future we have to use all of that.

I'm on a statewide panel. This is something they probably wouldn't have talked about ten years ago, but it's doing what Singapore and some other places have done, which is direct potable use of wastewater, so it's really cleaner than what would come out of your tap, and then getting to the point where you can actually drink that. That's expensive water. Some of that water we still want to do what they're doing in Orange County, which is let it filter down through the ground and have it stored underground, but we don't have any sense of priority in how we use water.

So we've just passed a water bond for $7.5 billion, the largest of a whole series of water bonds we've done, and I had worked on all of them in favor of them until this one, because this one included almost 3 billion for dams, which don't make any sense in these times. They're old, bad ideas that are high cost, low yield. But we throw everything together. We throw ocean desalination, which sounds like a good thing, until you look at it and you realize it's energy-intensive, it's got an impact of sea life as you suck the water in and the brine discharges. You drop it off, you get a very small volume of water. Private companies are promoting it, called

Poseidon, in Carlsbad.

That's because they're going to build the first plant in California large scale, trying to do one in Huntington Beach. But until we've taken care of all the wastewater, we dump three and a half million acre-feet. Acre-feet is roughly a third of a million gallons, the way we talk about big supply. But we dump that into the ocean in Southern California, treated to some level every year. Boy, if we used all that, we could offset the water that we would want to get out of more dams, that we'd want to get out of this latest version of what used to be called the Peripheral Canal that was voted down to take water and put it underneath the Delta in giant tunnels, cost $67 billion.

If we just took those big supply fantasies from the last century and turned them into becoming as efficient as possible, like Israel, Spain, and Australia, with relatively the same climate and lifestyle, then Southern California would make a move in the right direction. When we go through these dry periods, when they're historic, we'd be far better prepared than we are now.

COLLINGS:

So it sounds like you're pointing to a cultural predilection as the largest obstacle. It's not that it's an insurmountable engineering challenge, it's not an insurmountable technology issue; it really does have to do with how people in California and Southern California see our culture and our role vis-Ã -vis natural resources.

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EVERTS:

Yeah. If they adopt a conservation ethic, which was actually one of the things the governor promoted when he issued a nineteen-item proclamation this year in response to the drought, as they've done in Australia. So in Australia when people greet you, their comment is, "How is your take?," meaning what's the level of local water you've captured, because their intention is to get off utility or grid water, partly because they invested in things, in technology, in the midst of a drought, like these multi-billion-dollar desalination plans which now sit idle, but they're still paying for them. So the price of water got so high, then people dropped down their water usage, again in response to those prices and tried to get off, so they have big storage tanks in their backyards, rather than a lawn, and where that tank is has real meaning. Right now it's been and they have lots of water, so they don't have the same concerns, but the cost has gotten very high.

So I think we've had the illusion that water is not finite. We've had the illusion that it is cheap, and it has been cheap. And for agriculture, even what's left in Southern California, some it's just the price of pumping water. Other areas, amazingly, including San Diego County, we have farmers trying to farm on either wastewater or on urban water prices, which is shocking if you

compare it to how little they pay. So that acre-foot we were talking about, so your bottled water here, if this was Evian and you bought it at a little retail store, that would be a million dollars an acre-foot. De-sal would be about $4,000 an acre-foot.

Recycling wastewater to groundwater, indirect potable use would be $850 an acre-foot. Imported water is now just under $900 an acre-foot. But farmers can pay as low as $25 an acre-foot. In the Metropolitan Water District, a master wholesaler can pay as little as 25 cents at the Colorado River. They have to pay for pumping and treating it, but it's a cheap commodity. So there has to be a change in the way we price water, but at the same time, it has to be fair to those that use the least. So we're talking about tiered rates. I think people at the very bottom, at basic level, should actually pay nothing or very, very little for that small amount that they actually use.

If you use more or if you're demanding more, used to be you paid less. The more you used, the less you paid for it. Should be the other way around. Obviously, we're getting to that point. Irvine Ranch Water District is an example of a place that has a water budget that people have to live and work around and they accommodate for outdoor landscaping, but generally we don't do that and we don't have that sense of priority.

So we need to change how we look at water as an ethic and value, and so it's a culture change. But I think a lot of people are willing to make that change. You just need someone, one person on the block to start to change so they see the value, and then they realize they wouldn't be the only one and that there's an aesthetic to it as well, because if you put in sage plants and a variety of blooming plants you don't have to mow and you don't have to flood, and you water maybe once or twice a month once they get established, then that that has a cultural shift for people who can see that and that it's acceptable. But in a lot of places, including homeowners associations, you were required to have large lawns and you were required to be mass-metered, and so people didn't even know what their individual water usage is. And for agriculture, there's a whole â€˜nother, as we talked about, sense of entitlement, because they were given water rights and water contracts.

They thought those were sacrosanct and that they were, even when we didn't have it, entitled to water, and the environment was never given--you have to sue to get the flow for fish, for instance, and to maintain those levels. So right now we've over-allocated the amount of water we have in the state about five and a half times, so if we don't realize that there's a limit and if drought doesn't give us an opportunity to see that that's a window on the future, what it could be like with less water, then we're going to continue to have these conflicts and water wars where we don't really make the changes, or we do a little bit during--at the end of a drought, we've begun to respond, and then if El NiÃ±o had happened, or now they're predicting a wet spring, people tend to forget. But in general, if we make the kinds of changes we've talked about, water demand begins to not only level but go down, which is what it needs to do in the long term.

So I think the other impediment is we have thousands of water agencies in the state, each one with a governing board often elected that people are hardly aware of and a large staff and fixed cost to maintain. We have wholesale agencies that are almost like private corporations in their control, with little incentive to save and little or no oversight. We have politicians often beholden to the powers, including the agricultural large corporations that run big agriculture, with offices

in Beverly Hills. They're on Wilshire Boulevard or Olympic Boulevard, one big one. Not in the Central Valley, where they're growing crops. So they're disconnected from the land. So we're not talking about small farmers; we're talking about people with 10,000 acres and growing crops on such a scale that they are impacting the economies, ironically, of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, where they used to grow a majority of almonds, which now grow in the driest part of the San Joaquin.

COLLINGS:

Yes, and a very thirsty plant too.

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EVERTS:

Oh, yeah. One almond, you know, multiple gallons of water. It's really kind of amazing. So we are essentially, when we export 80 percent of a crop like almonds or alfalfa or cotton, we're exporting our own cheap water with it and having global impact. So it's both on the local impact, how does the individual make a difference, how does the region or the city make a difference, or how does an industry, including agriculture, make a difference?

When you're forced to realize there's only so much water and your entitlement can't go beyond what's really there, and switching from surface to groundwater, as we've done the last two years has only exacerbated the problem, then people start changing what they're growing, going back to maybe dry farming in places, allowing land to go fallow, which was the original intent of a lot of the water rights they got, was that it was an interruptible source and when water wasn't available, you wouldn't grow. You wouldn't put in a permanent crop like almond trees, because that requires water all the time. So you wouldn't have all these conflicts we have all the time in California.

It's a water paradox we have that you really don't see anywhere else like you see right here. In Australia, they had to undo their water rights, and they had to really go after groundwater management, and they had to make all those changes. It took them twelve or thirteen years of drought to get to that point, but they're in much better shape now because of it. And because of where they are in the southern hemisphere, they're experiencing these extremes. But we've got this funny exchange where we can learn things from them and they can learn from us. But it's how do you make, I think in California, how do you make the proper choices? And in energy we call it a loading order, where we actually rank benefits and impacts and then make your choices based on that.

So if you compare a coal-fired plant or a nuclear power plant to renewables [unclear] efficiency, we don't do that with water. We made an effort to try to get that discussion, but the interest in

water is at such loggerheads that we don't seem to resolve that. So it really needs political leadership to get beyond those interests, and it needs some rational discussion coming from universities, coming from, I think, the next generation. I've always tried to have a whole group of interns that I work with, and a few of them have ended up working within the water industry, like at Long Beach. They were geography students. They were environmental scientists. They were athletes, a lot of them. And they were all interested in water issues.

And that really needs to happen, because there's going to be this big gap of the older, graying white power structure in water and people that are coming up that should be representing their communities and need to get involved. There's actually going to be a huge institutional knowledge gap as well, and so there should be major mentoring and opportunities going right on now to change that. I'm seeing a little bit of that happening. Certainly on a political and policy level that change is happening. One of the favorite people I work with have come out of the environmental justice communities, and they're dealing with the over almost two million people who don't have access to clean drinking water in California.

So that's not just in those wells we're talking about in the Central Valley where they're competing with pollution from commercial chemical fertilizers, but they don't have access to the clean snow-melt water that goes right by them to corporate agriculture and to southern urban usages, but also includes communities with industrial pollution like Maywood and Southeast L.A. and little tiny communities. Maywood's less than one square mile, 97 percent immigrant population renters. Only landlords have votes in three private water mutual companies that are a highly agricultural area and they don't have the capacity to clean up the water. We had a lot of meetings down there, but the one that I remember is when one of the general managers of these three private water mutual companies said, "So what? It's just brown water for brown people." It's manganese, but it's also TCE and all these chemical pollutants that are in their water.

So people are supposed to go out and buy domestic water usage from either aqua stores for high price or buy bottled water. They're delivering bottled water to people now, you know. You get a case of water, and you're supposed to wash your clothes and do all your domestic uses with that. In California. Those are third-world conditions we have in California. People aren't aware of that. So there needs to be a revolution in water in terms of people's involvement, in terms of people getting--I ran for my local water agency.

The guy I beat had walked into office, which means he was appointed when his father died in office, and he expected to die in office too. That's not uncommon. People who often run are represented by interests, be they business or agriculture, rather than the community itself, and that really has to change. And I think a younger generation needs to get in because people who've been in some of those spots for twenty, thirty years are finally literally dying out. And people need to realize that water doesn't just happen. It's essentially manufactured and produced, and it's an industrial product in California. If we want to have anything left of the environment, it's going to take everybody owning it and buying in, being involved.

So those are the kind of serious changes that are beginning to happen but really need to happen, and so when I see a Water Board seat and I see that--what was the last election? Forty-five percent of people voted in L.A. County. It was 25 percent of registered voters, which means you

could win an election with 13 percent of the vote. But when you look at the Water Boards, you have less people that are voting for those because in some areas, they've been targeted by people using those as steppingstones, others who realize they're powerful positions. We have thirty-seven people who sit in the MET board, and all of them are appointed.

Their meetings are in the middle of the day. People aren't aware of them. They don't get media coverage, and yet that's a huge and powerful shadow government that controls how we incentivize water, what water costs, where the sources are. They make decisions in our name that we may not want the results of into the future, including investing in dams on the San Joaquin River or in North Sac Valley, which has nothing to do with our local water. So we would look to DWP to be far more aggressive, and they're slowly getting there, and the mayor has made a declaration of where they want to go. But how you leverage that change and make it happen, rather than just setting goals, is hard work and is going to take more involvement than turning your tap and expecting water to come out every time, which people still do.

And until like with my aunt and uncle in Cambria, not only did their water go dry and their well went dry, when they drilled another one, there wasn't water, so they had to move. We don't think of that happening in California. We expect our water agencies to provide it for us, without being involved, and that may not happen if we continue the way we have in the past, if we don't take it seriously when we go into the drought. We should always plan for that driest day plus fire, and we're seeming to have more of both.

COLLINGS:

I'm going to pause. [recorder turned off]

COLLINGS:

Okay.

EVERTS:

I'm sure you had questions you want to ask me directly.

COLLINGS:

Yeah. Well, we were talking a little bit about how important it is in this work to change people's minds, and you had alluded to your work in Ojai. Could you say something more about that? It had to do with metering the wells and there was a big backlash from the community.

01:10:3601:12:29

EVERTS:

Sure. So in California, we're the last state without groundwater regulations. Used to be us and Texas. Now Texas has regulations. So because of that, it's been like the Wild West, and people have been able to use the water and expect that it's theirs personally, because the constitution in California says it belongs to everyone, you have the right to use it, not abuse it. So you can have a reasonable use. So when we had come through a drought period, we applied to the state, the legislature, to enact legislature so we in that small community in Ojai, which is an anomaly that it has its own local water, has a reservoir that was built in '59, Casitas Lake, and then it also has a mix of--what do we have--oranges, lemons, not many lemons because of frost, but avocados and grapefruit are still grown there, and a relatively small urban population.

So we set out to--what we thought was simple--get farmers to put meters on their wells, and it turned out to be one of the only places in California where that happened. It was very contentious. I don't know if we changed people's minds. I think it's more of assuring them that we weren't going to steal that water. They thought the Metropolitan Water District in L.A., if they had meters, would steal their water. That's the reason why cities like Sacramento and Fresno, Davis, and other places are just putting meters in. Sacramento had it in its charter, because they're afraid a private water company would take them over, add meters. They had in their charter that they would never put in meters, and if they did, they wouldn't be read.

So I got a little tired of working on the legislation when the best we could do when Steinberg was actually in the Assembly years ago was by the year 2025, all urban areas would have water meters. And that was, like, fifteen years off. I thought, "Really? That's the best we can do?" But in Ojai we were able to reassure people that their water wasn't going to be stolen, we weren't going to charge them a lot for it, the kind of wave of anti-government we were in didn't apply to this locally. I hired a thrice-retired older engineer who was able to go out on people's lands and talk to them about their wells without being shot. I brought in a facilitator, a friend of mine from a group Dorothy Green started, called POWER, Public Officials for Water and Environmental Reform. We'd been doing workshops on all these issues for many years. He did the facilitation, and we got people feeling like this was for the good of the community.

Everyone thinks of Mark Twain's comment about water, "Water's for fighting. Whiskey's for

drinking." The one he has that applies to water for me is that he likes progress; it's change he has a hard time with. I think farmers had a real hard time with the change, and some of these were gentlemen farmers too. They weren't large scale, but they had long-established property.

COLLINGS:

So the reason to meter the water to was to know--

01:14:26

EVERTS:

Levels of the underground aquifers. As we had gone from drought, when it probably would have been more apparent when we got the legislation through, to El NiÃ±o and then the wells were not only artesianing in places because it's like a little tipped bathtub, you know. "Ojai" means "the nest" in Chumash. It's surrounded by mountains and waterfalls, the transverse range east to went from Point Concepcion. So they get more rainfall than we do down here. So when it rains, it rains heavily. The water levels come up. But we had to convince them you don't want to wait until the bank is empty. You want to do it when it's full and plan for the next time it's dry.

And we were successful. I wasn't popular, not at first, until they realized I wasn't there to steal their water. And I actually had connections with my grandmother and other family members that went way back. That made it maybe more acceptable. But we went ahead and did it, because somebody needed to. It was kind of like the wastewater treatment plant in West Basin, Santa Monica has something right at the pier called SMURF, where they capture storm water, dry weather, and treat it onsite. We always thought when those things were going in in the nineties that we would be examples and others would follow. It hasn't happened, unfortunately.

So now we have groundwater regulations statewide. Everyone is patting themselves on the back about the water pond. But it's not going to solve anything, because it gives them five years to put a plan together and isn't clear on who the stakeholders are, except for locally. If they don't do that within five years, then the state comes in, but they have another fifteen years to implement it. We don't have twenty years right now to not solve our groundwater problems.

COLLINGS:

Well, it's very interesting to hear how in both of these instances, the toilet switch-out and how the community communication and working almost like one-on-one with people--

01:16:14

EVERTS:

With people who effect that change, because the change comes, I think, from the people in the community, not from the utility or even other forms of government imposing it. But you needed to have the mandatory requirements. The only reason we did the toilet program is because DWP, because they weren't getting the water from Mono Lake, was required to find other ways of saving water. So 30 percent of the water that we saved in L.A. though those community-based and other programs goes back to Mono Lake.

In Ojai, all the water we would save, and once you put a meter in, it's about 30 percent you save just by having the meter and people being able to measure and realize. We had fancy computer systems and weather stations and everything, but they weren't connecting it to their actual use of the meters. Once they actually had that missing link, then they were able to reduce and measure and monitor their usage, and we were able to see what was underground. So we were actually able to control the groundwater in anticipation of the next drought.

Then at some point, you'd have to limit them, and because it's uneven underground, it's kind of like an inverted triangle or pyramid, so once it begins to drop, you think you have a lot at the top, but as it drops, it's precipitous, and then it drops. That's why you see land subsidence and you see places in the Central Valley where telephone utility poles were up and now they're--so if I raise my hand, I'm six-six, it's a little bit over eight feet. But telephone poles that have dropped that much with the land. So we had a sinkhole and we had the big leak in the Valley, and the fire truck fell in. That's what happens when water essentially sucks the land down and there's a vacuum. And that's what we're creating with groundwater.

But it does create, I think, not only a sense for people having a sense of purpose in their water future, but also a sense that they're empowered, that they can actually control it. Otherwise, it's an abstract, you know. Someone's providing us with water. We pay for it. But for farmers, it's their lifeblood, and so they feel very tight, and they have these incredible sometime arcane water rights to control it. Pre-1914, the superior water rights, and that's why water can be transferred from the Imperial Valley to San Diego, which was a huge settlement, and they can offset that. But until we balance how much we use on the urban level, by just taking water away from agriculture, we're not solving the problem. You might be making it worse, because once urban areas are in, you can't-- When we get to that point, that's another issue. But it is definitely social, and it's the way I see it. Southern California Watershed Alliance was looking at things on a systems level.

COLLINGS:

Well, let's talk about that. You're the founder of the Southern California Watershed Alliance, founded in 1996?

EVERTS:

Correct.

COLLINGS:

What led up to this?

01:19:4201:21:25

EVERTS:

We had a whole process then of collaboration called CALFED. CALFED was bringing together state, federal, local agencies with the idea that we could come up with a water solution. We seem to go through these cycles where we set this. I question the value of it. I think I had mentioned to you before, one of my mentors was Dorothy Green, kind of a matriarch of environmental groups. The other one who lived in Ojai and I worked with was Carla Bard, who had been head of the State Water Resource Control Board and hired by the younger Jerry Brown when he was mayor the first time, who I had the honor of working with.

And she said CALFED is one of these programs that are like quicksand: you'll step in and you'll never get out. And it never received the federal money it wanted. It did some restoration work, but we were trying to make the link between where our water comes from, so not just the eastern Sierra, but also I was working with people in Quincy and northeast California, because they are the high meadow sponges that feed into the Feather River, that feeds into the Sacramento, that feeds into the Delta, where the huge pumps bring water south.

So we saw the value of working together in those two areas, so we started the Southern California Watershed Alliance to give value and recognition for programs like the community-based organizations, so people in Northern California just don't say we steal their water, while the urban areas do the same thing. They just take the water from the western Sierras and run

pipelines from the Hetch Hetchy reservoir on the Tuolumne River to San Francisco and the Pardee Reservoir on the Mokelumne River to the East Bay. So they're doing the same thing.

But ironically, in Southern California we were doing more with conservation. We were doing more with recycled water. So it was to give some value for that and bring money to finance these programs, including watershed programs, when they were still local activist programs before they became more government oriented. So that's how that started, and I think it built up successfully. It was kind of an ad hoc coalition, and it was to give value to other things, including environmental justice and my passion of steelhead and bringing down dams and things that people just don't think about in Southern California if you don't experience it.

You can even live here and not realize it. But certainly people in Northern California, where the government, the capital is, where a lot of finance was, weren't aware of these issues. So that was the purpose of the Southern California Watershed Alliance. Then we got in this battle between supply versus demand, so we spun off a desal response group dealing with these proposals to dump tons of money and resources in ocean desal. We haven't finished recycle conservation and stormwater and graywater, all these other things we need to do locally.

And then more recently, if you've seen our website, we got involved in the Delta tunnels, which is a reincarnation of the Peripheral Canal, moving freshwater around the Delta right to the pumps so the estuary doesn't get enough freshwater, doesn't really solve the problem. But it's been sold as something very different. So we've been very involved in that fight. Then because I was a member of a statewide group called the Environmental Water Caucus, made up of about forty groups statewide, mostly Northern California, I'm now the facilitator of that as well, and we're focused on a lot of these issues, including what we call "paper water," which is water that doesn't exist except in contract. And that water allows for growth and development and a lot of other things to happen, but when you call on that water, it's not there. So it just increases this over-allocation of water.

COLLINGS:

You said that Southern California Watershed Alliance, one of the things it was doing was to give--perhaps I'm not remembering correctly, but to give some kind of legitimacy to community groups? What did you mean by that?

01:23:11

EVERTS:

So the decisions were being made in Sacramento to run CALFED and essentially fund programs that had a regional value, and one of the ways I did that was rather than these groups all having

to trek up to make a hundred thousand trips to Northern California in Sacramento, attended meetings and then helped especially the very basic community environmental justice groups that didn't have the capacity apply for and get money to run programs locally.

We think of historically watersheds, think of a big system from the mountains to where the water flows into rivers, eventually to the ocean, but our contention was in Southern California that included an urban element, and you may not see the river or the river may run down a concrete channel but that's still part of--and there's a social aspect to that as well. So that was part of what we tried to do, and it ended up me doing some funny things like taking kayaks down with a group that declared the L.A. River as navigable, which wasn't fun, quite honestly, because the concrete channel spreads out the little water.

COLLINGS:

That was not so long ago, right?

EVERTS:

A few years now, three or four years, maybe. But doing things like that, which actually had a policy element but also a social and a media exposure, they ended up making a documentary called Rock the Boat, but it was also a challenging experience. I should have asked the Tillman Treatment Plant where they do the wastewater and have a wonderful Japanese garden, a modernistic building, to release some of that water because they weren't putting it back in the ground, right? Then we would have had enough water to flow down that day.

Instead, I dragged my kayak during parts of it. There's little parts where the water table is so high, it's broken the concrete and trees have grown up, and those were actually--if you ignore the plastic bags from floods that were high in the trees, you still have birds and there were people, strangely, fishing, subsistence fishing for carp and stuff that live in the L.A. River. Once in a while, a steelhead will come up the L.A. River but not know where to go. But someday we'll see them come back. But it was a strange urban interface. But those kinds of things, as you said, are cultural and cross those lines, so when I go to a school in East L.A., I can say, "That's a river you have out there."

And they may not even be aware of it at all. And someday that will change and someday we'll have flood control but like they do in other places of the world, not the way we've just made it, forced all the pollution in the water go out to the ocean as fast as possible, because we have great potential here. Tillman Treatment Plant We're not a desert. We're a semi-arid Mediterranean

place. Our average is just under fifteen inches, which is not a lot different from Monterey in Northern California. We have the potential, when we get water in long periods when we're dry, to capture and reuse that water and store that water underground and be far more efficient than we are. So that was what the Southern California Watershed Alliance was set up to do.

COLLINGS:

You also mentioned something about community groups that in their life cycle went on to become more professionalized.

EVERTS:

Sure. So Mothers of East L.A. was a good example, which started out actually fighting a power plant in their neighborhood, a successful fight, and I think they also had a fight against a jail being put in their neighborhood. But then they got into the water issues, and that allows them to raise funds, started a credit union, started health programs, and so they kind of, through water, grew up and built their capacity, and then went beyond that. And now the granddaughter, daughter, of the Mothers of East L.A.--

COLLINGS:

Elsa Lopez.

EVERTS:

Elsa Lopez. I don't know if you've had a chance to talk to her.

COLLINGS:

I saw her on a panel not long ago.

EVERTS:

She was just coming out of high school when I started working with her on all this. She now works for the Water Replenishment District in Southern California, which is one of the few groundwater agencies that's moving for independence from imported water by storing and reusing it, controlling their groundwater and cleaning up their groundwater, so that someone else has kind of come full cycle in terms of it being a lifelong employment. And those are the kinds of ways I think we should look at water, is in terms of opportunities.

COLLINGS:

Can you think of any other groups that might have had a similar kind of--

01:29:28

EVERTS:

So I think the groups that used--so the ones I named earlier, they all had other things they did, except for Adro Environmental, which I think was very successful until the program ended, Ade Adejini did a wonderful job based on almost--he was literally a Nigerian prince and had come over here. I went to his wedding. The women had these headpieces. But he felt a strong social conscience, and so he did that on his own with a partner, and they were very successful. The Koreatown Youth and Community Center, they had other programs they were doing, so this was a program they did for a while that allowed people that worked on it to get some job training on project management, other opportunities.

The Asian American Drug Abuse Program, those people got the same. They got job training. They got a sense they were doing something of meaning. The Calvary Baptist Homes, actually I guess they were developing houses as well or doing other related things. Then there's an interesting one in Hollywood which are these two Russian Jewish guys, Community Enhancement Services, that do English as a Second Language, that do all these other services. So under their umbrella, water for a while, when it was busy, was one of those things, and we had

an L.A. water conservation group that was kind of the umbrella for all of these for a while. So the idea is I guess you diversify in your social services, and water ended up being one of those.

Then in the future, even now, as L.A. is looking to distribute some of these programs, there are other opportunities for other community groups. One that came out of here who's very interesting, Miguel Luna, started Agua University that I spoke at, and Urban Semillas and is working in community gardens and other aspects so was very involved in all of this. The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water had a person here who went to graduate school at UCLA in urban planning. So we've seen a lot of the people kind of grow up and grow out and go on to other things, but their time doing these water programs gave them real opportunity as well, which I think is the best opportunity for a nonprofit.

COLLINGS:

So the environmental justice work that you had mentioned earlier, was that through the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water?

01:30:56

EVERTS:

Primarily, yes. That came out of CALFED, too, ironically, because CALFED had determined there was no environmental justice impacts except on farm workers maybe, and they couldn't really clarify that. We were working with urban people in the Bay Area. So one of the impacts of the pollution and the water quality was not only drinking water, but people who were subsisting off of fishing, and they would be impacted directly by this, because this would divert water that would otherwise be part of a natural fishery.

Then there were job opportunities and others in urban areas, and so we got involved in Hunter's Point outside of San Francisco and Richmond and other communities, including Maywood down here in Southern California, communities in Coachella Valley, communities in the Central Valley. And that organization is still carrying on and doing work, including on the central coast. So I co-founded that, and it's been thirteen, fourteen years. We've had some ups and downs as people have moved up and moved on, but that, I think, was a key way of showing how the social impact is as important as the scientific or engineering impact. They've got a new film out based on a book they did. It's a little bit different, but it's a documentary called Thirsty for Justice, which they're beginning to show around the state, that deals with all these issues, because you have to visually see it to understand that people are without access to not only drinking water but sanitation services in California too.

So that was, I think, to me a key part of the work I've done and seen, a next generation of people

that looks a whole lot more like the diversity of California rather than myself, and the people who they work with are now legislative aides or are running for office themselves or are working in the governor's policy horseshoe or working for other branches of government because they've had these opportunities. They've started out often with taking advantage of educational opportunities they had, but wanted to come back and work on a community level and have stayed there at that level, basically, most of them, work for foundations. It's been an interesting transition to see that over time.

COLLINGS:

It sounds like you feel very positive about this kind of generational shift, all new people with an environmental justice point of view coming into the work, that perhaps that wasn't something that you were finding earlier on.

EVERTS:

No, historically that's not the history of environmental organizations. That's not the history of the water and industrial water world, even public agencies. I think that shift has happened, and I think it will continue to happen, and I think that is the way it should be, but it isn't happening quickly enough, and I don't think there's enough mentorship of people. I mean, I cry out for people with skills and engineering background to go help Maywood, and it hasn't happened, but they need it. They don't have the capacity themselves.

COLLINGS:

What is the Maywood situation?

01:35:04

EVERTS:

So Maywood is the town with the "brown water for brown people," as infamously the general manager said, where you have to be a landowner, even if you're absentee, to have a vote in those

local private mutual companies, and they haven't resolved who would be the alternative to serve them water. Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, the young woman who went to the urban planning program here at UCLA master's program had gotten very frustrated because they actually worked to get proxies to get people elected to that local Water Board, but when they actually got in that position of power, they voted to keep it private instead of make it public. So you've still got those institutional changes and cultural adaptations to being in those positions as well. So I think Maywood has gotten a lot of observation, but we haven't seen the change, kind of like we had the success with the community-based organizations and conservation, but it hasn't continued.

So it's not only how you start these things or set these goals or identify the challenges, but how do you actually institutionalize it and make that constant, so we're not talking about these things. Because in water, they say you can go away for thirty years, come back, and you'll have the exact same conversation because we haven't made the structural changes. So we continue to go in a circle around these issues.

COLLINGS:

Are you finding a lot of involvement from people from the UCLA Urban Planning School? Would you say that that's a stream of people into this?

EVERTS:

I haven't had that exposure to people there. I've had it the other way, actually, which I mentioned. Miriam Torres ended up going to [unclear], but not the other way. I've worked with geographers, I've worked with the Institute in the Environment, people from those programs, and then students from environmental studies and sciences programs. But that's where I've had my exposure from UCLA.

COLLINGS:

The Southern California Watershed Alliance, how do you pick the work? How do you prioritize?

01:36:55

EVERTS:

How do we do what we're doing? Sometimes it picks us, you know, like where people come to us and ask for help, and other times, I guess we see a need and we try to fill that. So I don't think there's a real process in that, but the needs are so great, there's a lot of opportunity. There's not always a lot of funding to fulfill that, but we've ended up getting contract work to work on certain things sometimes, and it's kind of followed the work.

But otherwise, often the funders then control where you go, and that's been a real challenge recently, too, where some major funders are saying you have to support the water bond, whether you agree with it or not. Well, funders shouldn't make that decision. The group should make the decision, and the funders can decide what they want to fund, but then the group should be able to go to the funders and say, "These are what our needs are" and find some balance there. But now we're seeing kind of a shift in that, where funders are deciding the policy or in some cases providing the policy themselves and hiring people to do the work from within the foundation, and that's kind of changed.

So we just lost a group we had, called Green L.A., which was made essentially to support Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's environmental policies and had different aspects in environmental justice, accumulative impacts, a water section, a transportation section. I think they had an energy section. So I co-chaired the water section. Now the funding's run out for that, we're on to a new administration, and just the water group--I call it the water gang--remains, because there is a need for all of us working on water, whether it's water quality or water supply, which are different, to pull together and make the link between the community organizations, which the good funders like Annenberg and others require.

So you're beginning to see these coalitions emerge. They go beyond the individual organizations. And I think that's probably my fatal flaw, is trying to put together coalitions, because it's often a challenge and the funders fund things separately, even though they say they'd like to see that kind of collaboration. It's very hard to get those alliances and coalitions funded, but there's a need for them because there's such--having driven it many times--a long, long state and such diversity in the regions and the politics and the solutions and the financing and wealth from one part of the state to the other.

COLLINGS:

You've spoken of the particular challenge of California. Are there any ways where you could say that working in L.A., working in Southern California, has facilitated the kinds of work that you're doing?

EVERTS:

Sure. I think the fact--I mean, that's why I prefer L.A. to, say, the Bay Area, where there's probably too many nonprofits. I think L.A. has a greater sense of community. I think it's less pretentious. I think it's more solution oriented. I think it's a more interesting mix. We're the second biggest Mexican city, second biggest Korean city, second biggest Armenian city. We've got strong cultures, and when they can come together on issues, it's very powerful, and I think that's what makes L.A. I think the solutions we do in L.A. can be used throughout the world, whereas I think some of the solutions we've done in California, we don't really want to export, like piping water hundreds of miles.

Spain and Australia were looking at that, "If we can just take our wet area and move water down to our dry urban areas that are more populated." Well, that's what we've done in California, and that's coming undone. I mentioned we over-allocated the water we have about five and a half times. Now with climate change, we're seeing a shift in the snow coming south, so, ironically, we may need to do more local water programs, which are about 40 percent for Southern California. People don't realize, but we need to expand that more than relying on importing water from hundreds of miles away in places where their climate is changing. And when their climate changes, there's less variability. We still have a lot left.

COLLINGS:

And you mentioned about how the industry uses quite a bit more water than people think of. Does the fact that there's such a large entertainment industry here present any particular kind of challenge or opportunity for environmental work?

EVERTS:

I think there's an opportunity. I think some environmental groups have done a very good job of including entertainment figures, personalities, and people who feel personally strongly about it. They've done a very good job of including those people, and I think that's been effective, and it's been effective for fundraising. And some of those people are capable of going out and being spokespeople. I won't forget Pierce Brosnan speaking at LNG Coastal Commission meeting and when he got up--

COLLINGS:

Oh, sure, with--

EVERTS:

Oxnard.

COLLINGS:

Was it the group No Oil? It had to do with the Palisades?

EVERTS:

No, this was actually bringing--

COLLINGS:

This was after that?

01:43:01

EVERTS:

This was bringing natural gas to a plant that would have been off Malibu. It never ended up

happening, because thousands of people show up. But when you see someone who's a professional actor, first, I'm always amazed how short they are, and, secondly, they have these wonderful voices and they can speak. And if they're speaking personally and passionately, it's very effective, and they are, for better or worse, listened to.

When I get up, everyone knows what I'm going to say from a water level. There's 100 people, same 100 people in the room talking to each other. But as much as you can bring in new voices, both diverse voices from communities and other public voices who have some weight, I think that helps. And I think that's an advantage in L.A. that we have that, but I don't think we fully use that, the personal resources and skills there are. Some organizations do a much better job of that than others, because I think L.A. gets looked at from around the world, good, bad, or indifferent.

The New York Times likes to make fun of us when we fail, but they also did a big article that I was quoted in about the Orange County Water District and our groundwater replenishment using recycled water. That's a success. So I think that all that makes L.A. interesting. So we can be a model. From going from living out in the woods on the coast of Maine, I think we can be a model for the rest of the world to do things right instead of being a model very often belittled for doing things wrong or kind of the absurdity of living and building a city of 10 million on fault lines with little water.

COLLINGS:

I know.

EVERTS:

But we're here. And how we can improve that, I think, will be responded to, and if people's image of us is swimming pools and endless acres of turf, they'll think that's what success is to a degree. But you know, you end up with a--they literally made a little development called Orange County in China where they took all the suburban China area and took suburban Orange County and just like transplanted it there, an image of it. It's like, "Really? Is that what you want? That's not a sustainable feature."

COLLINGS:

Oh, that's really interesting.

EVERTS:

So I've been lucky enough to get to travel a little bit on these tours, so I've been to China and Australia, and I've often been to Scandinavia, where they use a fraction of the resources also, and they have them. So they lack water, but they still use far less. So it's interesting to see that we're not the center of the world. We have been leaders in many things, but in terms of resources, we have a long ways to go. But I think that makes it exciting to be here, too, and I hope to stick around for a long time to see what happens in the future.

COLLINGS:

Okay. Should we leave it there then?

EVERTS:

Yeah, that's fine.

COLLINGS:

Okay.