

Protecting Napa's Future Water Supply By Chris Benz

After a wet start, the 2025-2026 rainy season has all but dried up, at least for the moment. So far this year, the state has received only 57% of our annual rainfall. Meanwhile, the Napa County Groundwater Sustainability Report shows that in 2024, groundwater pumping in the Napa River Subbasin exceeded the sustainable yield for the fifth consecutive year.

Efforts to reverse this trend and protect Napa County's water supply are the topics of a free event co-hosted by the Napa County League of Women Voters and Napa Climate NOW! on Tuesday, April 14, at the Napa County Library. The program is titled "Protecting Napa's Future Water Supply."

Joyce Kingery, Chair of the League's Climate Change Committee, explained, "Water is one of the most critical environmental issues facing our children and grandchildren, especially due to climate change. Three outstanding panelists will discuss how we can protect Napa's water supply for the future, sharing some of the innovative ideas being introduced in our own corner of the world."

Long-time water specialist, Rainer Hoenicke, will discuss how individuals can "slow, spread, and sink" local rainfall to help restore groundwater, preserve and restore woodlands, and reduce the heat. Jamison Crosby, Napa County's Natural Resources Conservation Manager, will give an update on the Groundwater Sustainability Plan and new fees for groundwater pumping. Lucas Patzek, Executive Director of the county's Resource Conservation District (RCD), will discuss watershed restoration projects and the formation of a new Watershed Group. County Supervisor Anne Cottrell will moderate the panel.

Hoenicke described his career as "soaked in water science." In college, he specialized in the study of lakes, then researched the effects of acid rain for the Environmental Protection Agency. He subsequently worked on the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Project in Southern California, followed by a long stint at the San Francisco Estuary Institute (SFEI), eventually as Executive Director. Hoenicke finished his career at the Delta Stewardship Council, where he worked to advance California's co-equal goals for the Delta: a more reliable statewide water supply and a healthy and protected ecosystem that protects and enhances the unique characteristics of the Delta.

While at SFEI, Hoenicke was involved in restoration projects on the Napa River's Rutherford and Oakville to Oak Knoll reaches. These projects relied on public-private partnerships to reduce existing bank erosion and enhance riparian and aquatic habitat along 13.5 miles of river.

"At SFEI, we worked with the Farm Bureau and the Napa County RCD to evaluate management practices that would reduce sediment input into the river to improve impaired salmonid habitat," he said.

Hoenicke is enthusiastic about the 2024 adoption of the California Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. Under this Act, the Napa River Subbasin was required to develop a Groundwater Sustainability Plan, which takes a multi-pronged approach to water resource protection.

Now retired, he volunteers as a UC Master Gardener. He is particularly interested in the “small water cycle” – the localized, continuous recycling of water between land, vegetation, and the atmosphere, which is responsible for up to two-thirds of local rainfall.

“Soils, vegetation, and water are tightly connected and have to be taken into account if you want to turn the heat down,” Hoenicke explained. “The concept, ‘Slow it, spread it, sink it,’ is really important. We need to keep the water on the land, rather than let it rush to the river and then out to the ocean, where it will come back in torrential rains and flood everything.”

Water users (and that’s all of us!) are encouraged to attend, learn, and engage in a timely discussion about safeguarding Napa’s water supply for generations to come.

Upcoming Free Events

- Green Screen Film Series: “Wilding” Napa County Library, April 12, 2-4 pm.
- “Protecting Napa’s Future Water Supply,” Napa County Library. April 14, 5:30-7 pm.
- UC Master Gardeners Workshop, “Worm or Backyard Composting,” Skyline Wilderness Park in Napa, April 25, 10:00 am - 12:00 pm. No entrance fee for registered attendees.

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW!

Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens’ group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area.

Info, napa.350bayareorg

Photo credit: Chris Benz

Photo caption: Panelist Rainer Hoenicke with his granddaughter in his home garden.

