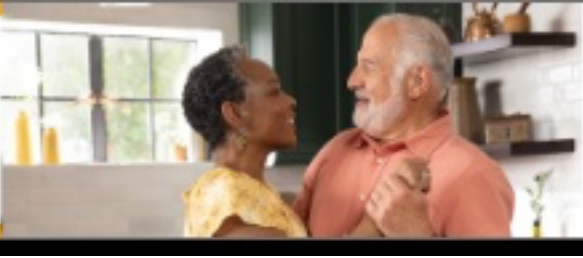


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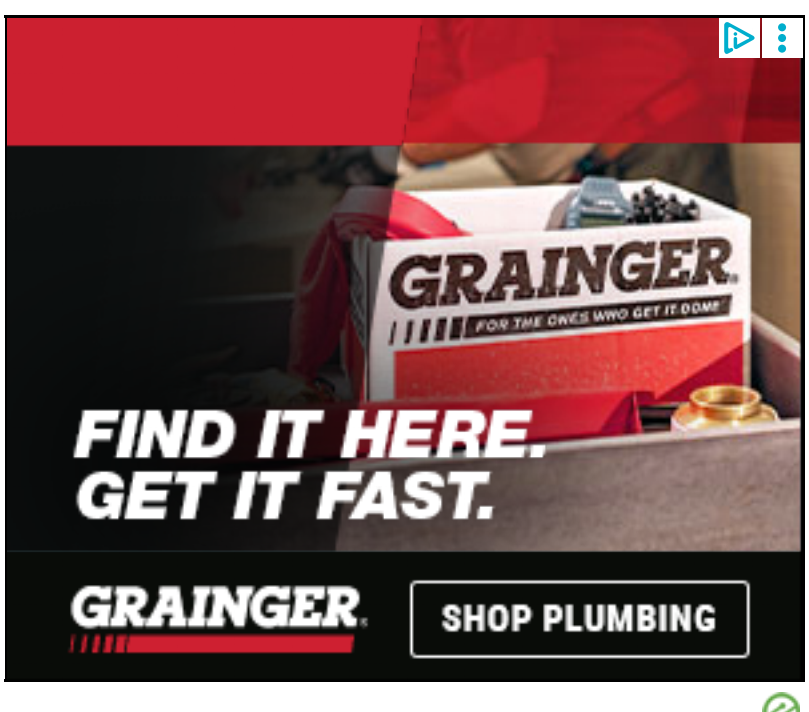
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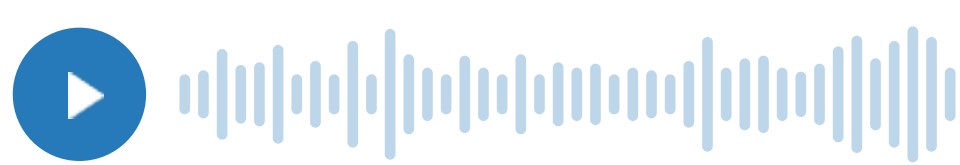
An aerial view of the San Dieguito Reservoir and Pump Station in Rancho Santa Fe. Courtesy photo/Santa Fe Irrigation

San Dieguito Dam repairs could lower water costs for North County

by Summer Hu | June 26, 2026 | 565

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RANCHO SANTA FE — Some North County residents could pay less for water following restoration work on the San Dieguito Dam in Rancho Santa Fe, according to the Santa Fe Irrigation District.

In March 2024, the California Division of Safety of Dams identified seepage at the dam during a routine inspection. Repairs began in February and were completed in March.

The repairs mean that about 60,000 residents in Rancho Santa Fe, Solana Beach, Encinitas and Fairbanks Ranch can once again rely more heavily on local water supplies rather than more expensive imported water, according to Santa Fe Irrigation spokesperson Teresa Penunuri.



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re local water supply that we can use — it means less water that we have to pull off the Colorado River, which is in dire straits right now, as well as less water that we have to purchase from state water projects,” Penunuri said.

Imported water purchased through the San Diego County Water Authority costs about \$1,400 per acre-foot. Using local water instead saves about \$1,000 per acre-foot, Penunuri said. One acre-foot equals about 325,000 gallons, enough to supply three households for a year. However, she noted that the amount of local water available each year depends on rainfall.

The \$900,000 restoration project eliminated the source of the seepage by removing a 26-inch concrete pipe about 15 feet west of the dam, along with the original valve and the concrete encasing the pipe, according to a joint statement from Santa Fe Irrigation and San Dieguito Water districts. Following the repairs, the dam retained its satisfactory safety rating.

The San Dieguito Mutual Water Company and Santa Fe Land Improvement Company built the San Dieguito Dam in 1918. Lake Hodges, north of Rancho Bernardo, was constructed the same year. Penunuri said both dams were built in the early 1900s to capture local runoff and establish a reliable local water supply.

In 2023, the state dam safety regulator gave Lake Hodges Dam an unsatisfactory rating. The designation followed years of warnings from the agency, which ultimately ordered the City of San Diego to make emergency repairs in 2022.



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As a result, the city was required to comply with a state-mandated operating restriction that kept the “lake level as low as possible,” Penunuri said.

In 2024, Santa Fe Irrigation and San Dieguito Water filed a \$21 million lawsuit against the City of San Diego, alleging breach of contract and failure to properly maintain Lake Hodges Dam. Santa Fe Irrigation, which previously received about 30% of its water supply from Lake Hodges, said on its website that the loss of local water forced the district to adopt a new rate structure, increasing customer water bills.

According to the district, from 2022 through 2024, the City of San Diego released more than 17,000 acre-feet — about 5.5 billion gallons — of water belonging to the two districts due to state-mandated lake-level restrictions. The lost water, valued at about \$21 million, represented roughly two years of water supply for customers served by the Santa Fe Irrigation and San Dieguito Water districts.

Penunuri said the ongoing lawsuit aims to “recover some of the costs associated with the water loss we’ve had.” Despite the financial hit from the Lake Hodges Dam, Penunuri said conducting preventative maintenance on the San Dieguito Dam allowed Santa Fe to complete repairs as quickly and “financially responsible” as possible.

“We have to have water. That’s the lifeblood of our community and our economy,” Penunuri said.



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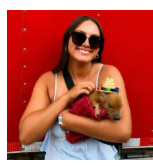


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Summer Hu
Summer Hu is a first-year student at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism and a photojournalism intern at The Coast News.

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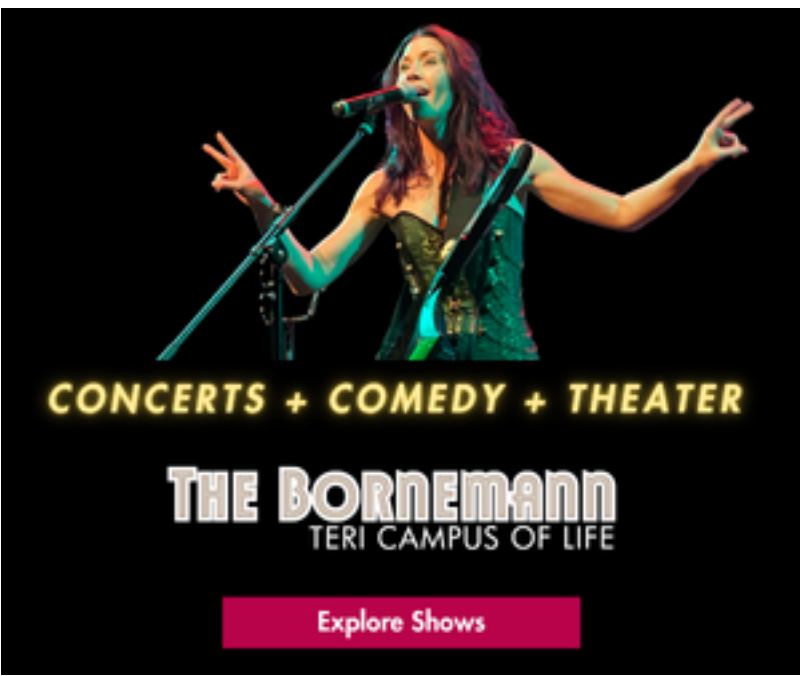


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