

V. The “Big Picture”: Lake Berryessa Issues: 1957 - 2012

PETER JENSEN, Napa Register, August 19, 2012

(Author’s Note: This article from the Napa Register is included here in full because it is one of the best researched and most comprehensive summaries of the historical background of the Lake Berryessa Saga.)

Napa County Got the Headaches, Solano County the Water

Death came to the Berryessa Valley, a fertile paradise where families had farmed for a century, during the rains of the winter of 1957. The residents, ranchers and farmers had left, the buildings were razed, the orchards cut down, the crops uprooted. Even the graves in the cemetery were exhumed and moved to higher ground. By order of the United States government, almost everything of value was removed. All that remained that winter was the two-lane highway and the stone bridge — Napa County’s longest — over Putah Creek.

By then, the 300-foot-high Monticello Dam was complete at Devil’s Gate, where Putah Creek broke east through the Blue Ridge, carving a canyon - and a natural dam site - on its way to the Central Valley. The creek had run through the valley for thousands of years, but now its waters were backing up. They seeped up the highway, over the flattened town of Monticello, over the scoured farmland. On February 26, 1957, crews poured the last bucket of concrete for Monticello Dam. Per tradition, they tossed in a few coins as well.

With the dam’s completion, Napa County, which today so prizes its world-renowned agriculture, lost one-eighth of its farmland, an area with annual agricultural production valued at \$1 million in 1947. What it gained was a reservoir, Lake Berryessa, whose benefits would flow primarily eastward. Lake Berryessa would become Solano County’s economic treasure, an exclusive source of reliable water for its farms and cities.

In 1948, the federal government had to choose between saving Berryessa Valley for farming or flooding it to benefit neighboring Solano. Napa County touted the valley’s 12,000 acres as some of the most fertile in California. But in the eyes of the dam builders, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Devil’s Gate was one of the best dam sites in the entire Central Valley. The decision to flood Berryessa Valley reflected California’s insatiable need for water, its most precious resource. As the historian W.H. Hutchinson observed, irrigation produces more value every year in California agriculture than the value of all the gold mined in the Gold Rush.

Monticello Dam was designed to hold back 1.6 million acre-feet of water (1 acre-foot equals about 326,000 gallons), an enormous amount. In comparison, Napa, the county’s population center, uses less than 15,000 acre-feet per year, none of it from Lake Berryessa. Each year, the dam spills more than 200,000 acre-feet into Solano County, enough water to irrigate more than 80,000 acres of cropland and supply cities such as Vacaville, Vallejo, Suisun City and Fairfield, with enough left over for Anheuser-Busch to make Budweiser beer.

Solano County received a tremendous gift when Monticello Dam was built. Federal taxpayers covered the \$47 million in construction costs, which paid for the dam, a diversion dam, and a 33-mile canal to deliver the water. Solano paid that back over 50 years at zero percent interest.

Lake Berryessa is the largest federal reservoir in California whose waters are available almost exclusively to users in one county, which sits just miles from the source, said Drew Lessard, a deputy area manager for the Bureau of Reclamation. It cost Napa County dearly. Not only did the county lose some of its best agricultural land, but it receives a pittance of the water. The communities and resorts at the lake get Berryessa water, but it amounts to a small fraction of what Solano receives.

In 2005, Napa County studied what Lake Berryessa had cost county taxpayers the previous fiscal year. With the lakeside resorts fully operational, producing tax revenue, the county still lost about \$700,000, according to Helene Franchi, a county budget analyst. The lake was averaging between 1 million and 1.5 million annual visitors back then, according to Bureau of Reclamation statistics. Doing the same analysis in 2006, the county's loss was calculated to be more than \$800,000.

Franchi said the analysis looked at the costs of providing police, fire and emergency medical services to the lake, as well as the costs to the county jail for housing people arrested at Berryessa, among other expenses. The county found that 75 percent of the county's costs were to pay for Napa County sheriff's deputies and other law-enforcement expenses. The revenue didn't come close to covering the expense, she said.

Because the resorts are on federal property, the federal government gives the county an average annual payment of \$127,000 to pay for services that would be covered by the property tax revenue the county would otherwise collect, Franchi said. The county's costs have dropped in recent years because the flow of tourists has slackened due to scaled-back resort operations, but so have tax revenues, Franchi noted.

The lake is still a financial drain on county coffers. In the past two years, the county has lent \$3 million to cover operational deficits and other costs for two troubled utility districts at the lake, one serving Berryessa Highlands, the other Berryessa Estates. These loans will almost certainly be written off as county subsidies, with the prospect that yet more loans will have to be made, officials said. Considering what the value of Berryessa Valley's agricultural production was, and would be if it still existed, the size of the loss grows.

Napa and Solano battled over Berryessa's fate: Powerful forces aligned against Napa

Napa County never wanted to turn Berryessa Valley into a reservoir, but seemingly everyone else did. Solano County, California Gov. Earl Warren, even officials in Washington, D.C., conspired to build Monticello Dam and force the removal of an agricultural community that had thrived since the mid-19th century.

In the early 1900s, farming interests in Solano County were the first to covet Berryessa Valley water. They looked on with dismay as water from Putah Creek, an 85-mile-long stream with headwaters in the Mayacamas Mountains, rushed through the Berryessa Valley before disappearing into the Sacramento River delta network. They imagined a dam at the

eastern end of Berryessa Valley at Devil's Gate that would impound this abundant source of fresh water to irrigate Solano's orchards and fields.

In 1907, cities south of San Francisco considered Putah Creek as a far-flung way to provide water for their urban populations. To investigate the feasibility of a dam, they hired three engineers whose histories loom large over the American West, according to the Solano Irrigation District. The first was Arthur Powell Davis, a nephew to John Wesley Powell, who led the first American expedition down the Colorado River and is considered the grandfather of western water reclamation. Later, Davis would become the director of the fledgling Bureau of Reclamation. The second was George Washington Goethals, who had recently finished supervising construction of the Panama Canal.

The third was William Mulholland, the future superintendent of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. He would become notorious in western water politics soon after when he spearheaded the draining of the Owens Valley in the Eastern Sierra Nevada to deliver water to Los Angeles. L.A. received enough water to sustain decades of explosive growth. But that would come later. In 1907, the three men devised a storage plan centered on the construction of a large dam at Devil's Gate. When their plan was put aside, Solano County continued to push for the dam, and their calls for it reached a fevered pitch in the 1930s when western dam building was in its golden era.

During the 1930s and '40s, Napa and Solano counties fought a political battle over plans to dam Putah Creek and flood Berryessa Valley in northeast Napa County. Napa County officials wanted to preserve Berryessa Valley for agriculture, while Solano interests wanted the valley's water for Solano's farms and cities. The fight peaked in Congress during a series of hearings on a bill authorizing Monticello Dam before the House Subcommittee on Irrigation and Reclamation in April 1948. At the time, California was experiencing a post-World War II boom of population, agricultural and industrial growth.

The Central Valley Project had made its first delivery of water to Central Valley farmers eight years earlier, but more was needed. So when it came to decide whether the Berryessa Valley agriculture should live or die, California's governor, Earl Warren, left no doubt as to which fate he favored. Napa County was outgunned at the hearings. The pro-dam advocates included Solano County officials and irrigators, and military leaders at Mare Island Naval Shipyard, the Benicia Arsenal and Travis Air Force Base. Reclamation and Department of Interior officials also spoke in favor of the water project. Pushing against them were members of the Napa County Board of Supervisors and a delegation of Berryessa Valley farmers.

Secretary of the Interior Julius Krug issued a statement that was read at the first hearing, on April 12. The water supplies to those military bases were so inadequate, he said, that fresh water was brought in on barges. Based on an arrangement brokered during World War II, the city of Vallejo, which supplied Mare Island, was relying on water from the East Bay that was piped in over the Carquinez Strait. But that arrangement was set to end in 1952. Other cities in Solano County were relying on groundwater, which was rapidly running dry.

Reclamation Commissioner Michael Straus summed up the natural blessing Devil's Gate offered: "The rapidly accelerating growth of this area — and particularly in recent times — has brought about a rapidly accelerating water crisis to Solano County," Straus said.

“Fortunately in this area Putah Creek gives an opportunity for securing the vital water, and it is of such a physical nature as it flows through the Devil’s Gate that it is a natural dam site. . . . Anybody going through the Devil’s Gate who is interested in this type of development just stops and says, ‘Why, nature met us half way here.’ ”

Stanley Kerr, manager of Reclamation’s office in Sacramento, called Devil’s Gate the perfect site for a water project, as all the water released downstream could be moved by gravity, without expensive pumping.

“The Monticello Dam and Reservoir site is one of the most favorable in the entire Central Valley,” Kerr said. “The only unfortunate aspect of the entire project is that Monticello Reservoir would flood fertile lands in Berryessa Valley and the small town of Monticello. For every farm acre flooded by this reservoir, there would be brought under irrigation 9 new acres. The total benefits created by this project would be about 20 times the damage done to Berryessa Valley.”

Gov. Warren said in a statement: “I am of the firm belief that the construction of the Monticello Dam will represent the greatest good to the greatest number. We must conserve every drop of useable water for every purpose to which it can be economically put.”

Napa County argued that flooding the Berryessa Valley was unnecessary, and water could be stored by constructing a series of smaller dams higher up Putah Creek, north of the valley. Water for Vallejo and Mare Island could be piped into Napa’s Lake Hennessey, where it would travel through the city of Napa’s system to those destinations, local officials said.

County Supervisor N.D. Clark called the project an “unnecessary and wanton destruction of deep, rich, fertile soil.” He noted that the valley’s crop production had a value of \$1 million the year before, and the yields were uniformly high. Wheat averaged 35 bushels to the acre; barley garnered 45 bushels to the acre. Alfalfa yields were 8 tons per acre, while wine grapes could produce 4 to 5 tons per acre, with 8-ton yields not uncommon. A soil survey commissioned in 1933 found that almost all of the valley’s soils were considered high-grade, and didn’t erode with wind or rain. On April 26, Clark, the chairman of the Berryessa Valley Protective Association, offered a statement on behalf of that delegation.

“The people of Berryessa Valley, and the town of Monticello, will be made homeless and forced to relocate to other districts at a tremendous loss to them,” Clark said. “They will be scattered and separated, one friend from another, one relative from another, and let me say that some of these families have been established since pioneer days.”

The county delegation formally requested the subcommittee delay the bill, pending further study of the proposed alternative sites. The bill didn’t move forward, effectively blocking the plans for the dam.

“They convinced Congress that the alternatives were as good as the real thing,” said George Gamble, a modern-day Lake Berryessa resident whose family once ranched in Berryessa Valley. “They came back, just smiles on their faces.”

Proponents were unbowed, however, and found a workaround, Gamble said. The water source was declared to be needed for national defense purposes and met the legal

requirements for a federal reclamation project, which paved the way for the Secretary of the Interior, not Congress, to authorize the dam.

On Nov. 11, 1948, Secretary Krug signed the documents authorizing Monticello Dam. Proponents later secured funding for the \$47 million project through Congress, and construction began in 1953. For residents of Berryessa Valley, the die was cast. The exodus of the valley's farm families would soon begin.

"It changed my whole life," said Murray Clark, 79, a Berryessa old-timer. "It changed everybody's lives."

Death of Monticello Was a "Heartbreaker"

Out on the northeast end of Lake Berryessa, down a dirt road where cars can't help but kick up dust, lives a link to a bygone chapter of Napa County history. A Google map won't help you find his home, but he'll tell you where to go. Past the hill, it's up ahead. And drive slow — dust clouds have a habit of going everywhere you wouldn't want them. George Gamble greets you at his doorstep, shirt tucked into a pair of denim jeans. Inside his rustic, wood-framed home that you're sure was built by hand, he asks what you want to know.

"History," you say, "the history of the Berryessa Valley."

The valley, which once accounted for one-eighth of Napa County's agricultural land, was flooded to create Lake Berryessa and provide water to Solano County. Gamble, 75, is a member of an aging group of men and women who knew the valley personally. He grew up visiting his dad's ranches there before the valley was inundated in the 1950s. His father strung together three ranches during the Great Depression — 9,000 acres total — when the land was cheap, provided you paid off the back taxes.

Back then, the valley floor was covered with family farms whose land titles could be traced to the Homestead Act of 1862 or, if you wanted to go back further, to a Spanish land grant. Lots of dry-farmed wheat and barley fields, with some orchards and grapevines mixed in, Gamble says. Ranching was mostly in the foothills. All of that is gone now, flooded when the Bureau of Reclamation blocked Putah Creek with Monticello Dam, but Gamble remains.

Gamble and his brother, Launce, inherited 5,000 acres of ranchland on the east side of Lake Berryessa, where he now lives. Gamble leases out the ranch today, but he remains involved. If there's a fence that needs repair, he's sure to speak his mind. Gamble likes it out here, and he has no plans of leaving. It's quiet, he says, and he's learned to live without a grocery store or doctor nearby. He conducts a census of his neighbors on the east side by counting the mailboxes — 13 in total, although some no longer live there and others are only part-time.

Of his rural lifestyle, Gamble says, "To me, it's utopia. I couldn't imagine living in the Napa Valley and having to commute an hour or two each way. It would just take the fun out of life. When you only have to commute a hundred feet or so, it's pretty nice. This is just my way of life."

His way of life was once shared by hundreds of others in the Berryessa Valley. Murray Clark, 79, was raised in the valley on his family's property, located 5 miles north of the

valley's only town, Monticello, which had roughly 300 residents. His great-grandfather and great-grandmother moved west in a wagon in the 1860s and settled here. Clark's grandfather gave each of his children a ranch as a wedding present, and he recalls a childhood of working on his family's property. His mother worked as a maid in a mansion that burned down in the 1920s, he said.

Gamble recalled an annual rodeo held among the valley's ranch hands, and the sense of family the event fostered in the community. Huge slabs of meat were buried underground and hot coals were put on top to cook them, he remembers. The McKenzie General Store had a telephone switchboard that required you to plug in the line and crank it up to use it.

"Going back to when this was a rip-roaring valley, it was a lot different, obviously," Gamble said. "It was a great feeling among family. Everybody was so friendly. To me, it was the last of the old West."

The valley was also an agricultural jewel, with a diversity of loam soils whose depth and fertility rivaled Napa Valley's, according to Napa County Agricultural Commissioner Dave Whitmer. The geologic uplift that produced Napa Valley's world-famous wine region was at work in Berryessa Valley as well, Whitmer explained. Indeed, the valleys share a similar natural history. Each was formed out of the Coast Range, with a main source of water flowing through its heart. In Napa Valley, that source is the Napa River; in Berryessa Valley, it was Putah Creek.

The main differences between the two are climate and the final destinations of their water supplies. Napa Valley opens to the San Pablo Bay and its vineyards benefit from that marine influence. From its source near Calistoga, the Napa River flows unencumbered to the bay. Berryessa Valley is farther removed from the bay and is ringed by steep slopes on all sides, which gives it a hotter climate more comparable to the Central Valley. More significantly, Putah Creek pushes east through Devil's Gate, a natural site for a dam.

It took millennia to make the Berryessa Valley landscape, but less than a decade for the Bureau of Reclamation to turn it into a lake. Gamble recalls people moving out of the valley. Through eminent domain, the U.S. government took ownership of all the property in the valley and offered the residents money as restitution. Auctions were held in which people could buy and relocate some of the buildings. The home Gamble lives in today was acquired that way.

Gamble's father had a 3,000-acre ranch on the valley floor, which he considered the centerpiece of his properties. Losing that "was a heartbreaker," Gamble said. "My dad put in a lot of years in here. Then you're told one day that 'We want your land more than you do.'"

The cowboys and ranch hands picked up and left. Clark said his father struggled to leave the house he was born in. Clark left the valley angry in 1956 and went to work as a welder for Standard Oil in Richmond. He said he's still angry about it.

"It was devastating," Clark said. "We were really bitter about it. You hated the Bureau of Reclamation and anybody that had anything to do with it. I still hate them. I know that's not right, but that's the way it is."

"I'm sure that what was gained far exceeds what was lost, but we don't see that at the time," Clark said. "It's always a resentment. You get over it, but you still resent it." He couldn't face going back to Lake Berryessa for a number of years after the dam was built. "I couldn't go back," he said. "I couldn't go see that."

As he's gotten older, Clark said he's realized the importance of preserving the history of Monticello and Berryessa Valley. A memorial is held annually among the old residents, but "it's getting now where most of the ones that come are descendants," Clark said. When he dies, Clark knows where he'll be buried — at the Monticello Cemetery, which once sat on the valley floor but was moved to Spanish Flat.

Out at Gamble's house along that dusty road, the conversation has turned to broader themes. "What was here, before mankind, was a beautiful thing," Gamble says. "It was balanced — nature was balanced. Along comes mankind, and they start taking advantage of what is here.

"It's a shame that amount of good dirt has gone underwater," Gamble adds. "It's like everything in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. They're losing acres and acres every year under asphalt. One day we're going to need every bit of farming land we can get.

Monticello Dam Proposal Stresses Critical Water Shortage Throughout California: October 24, 1947

Painting a gloomy picture of the water situation in California, Congressman Richard Welch, chairman of the congressional public lands committee, informed officials and residents of Napa and Solano counties that the matter called for cooperation rather than controversy.

Welch's warning came at the meeting held last Monday morning at the Napa Chamber of Commerce, when Napa County's opposition to the Monticello Dam project was presented. He called upon the two counties to resolve their differences and work out an acceptable plan for the conservation of the water of Putah Creek as well as other water resources of the area.

"It is regrettable," the congressman stated, "that there are so many people in California, this semi-arid state, whose only interest in water is to turn a faucet, or, in the case of power, push a button."

"There is a critical shortage of water from one end of the state to the other. Napa and Solano counties are by no means the only areas in need of it. I have presented at meetings of my committee from Redding to Fresno, and the situation is the same in all places. In the great central valley, trees are dying even in the cities for lack of water.

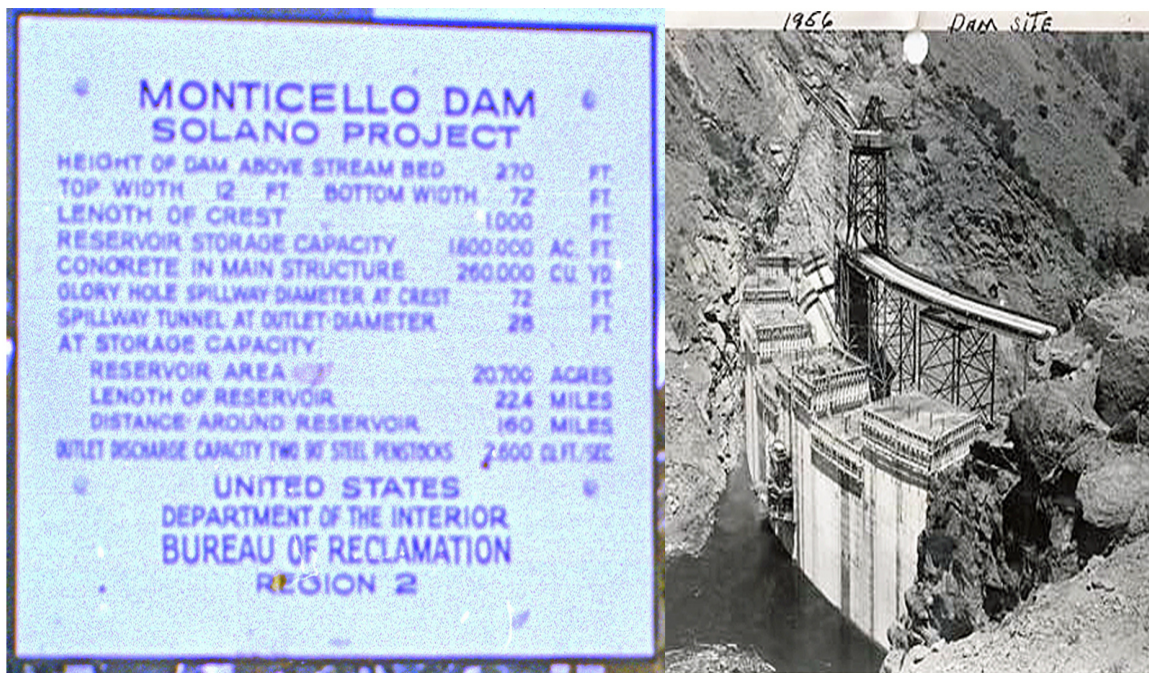
"Gentleman, I tell you water is California's biggest problem. Water and power are the life streams for our national defense and our peacetime economy. When you stop to realize that over two and a half million people have settled in California since Pearl Harbor — they are still coming at the rate of 2,000 a week — it is no wonder that there is a growing water and power shortage in every section of the state.

“We should see to it, therefore, that not one gallon of water necessary for the present and future demands of California be permitted to run into San Francisco Bay or the Pacific Ocean. Every kilowatt of potential power must be developed either by public or private enterprise.”

Thomas Maxwell, chairman of the Napa County Board of Supervisors, outlined plans for conservation of Putah Creek water through a series of small dams and reservoirs, which would impound the waters in southern Lake County and still preserve the fertile acres of Berryessa Valley. He said that Solano County’s need for more water was recognized and that he thought some plan could be worked out which would accomplish that same purpose and at the same time leave Napa County inviolate.

Delays in Master Plan Sabotage Berryessa Economy

With the high-noon sun above and the blue waters of Lake Berryessa below, the twin engines of the Bureau of Reclamation boat rev louder as the wake behind us grows. It’s mid-July, and the lake’s recreational charms are on full display. Out beyond the bow, the sun-burnt hills are a backdrop to the water’s unruffled calm, and the stifling heat of the late afternoon is still hours away. In a tranquil moment such as this, it’s hard to imagine how this lake, so conveniently near yet a world away from the San Francisco and Sacramento metropolitan areas, could find itself so mired in problems today.





Lake Berryessa in the second decade of the 21st century is in a state of tumult unprecedented in its 55 years of existence. Businesses have shuttered, home values have plummeted, the number of foreclosures has risen. But the national economy is only partially to blame for the lake's struggles. As a consequence of a change in federal management policy, the flow of tourists, once the lifeblood of the lake's economy, has dropped considerably from its past peaks. The Bureau of Reclamation is struggling to revive the seven resorts that were once the lake's economic engines.

Those resorts once had lodging, trailers, restaurants, stores, a tennis court and an ice cream parlor, almost all of which are now gone. Much of this was torn down in the last decade when the bureau, which manages recreation at the lake, opted to change six of the seven resorts' operators. We pull up along the lake's western shore, and bureau spokesman Pete Lucero points out some of the sites where 1,300 trailers and mobile homes once stood. The trailers clogged some of the best recreation areas of the lake, he said. Some had no-trespassing signs posted, making public federal land appear privately owned.

The bureau was successful in clearing out much of Lake Berryessa's early development. The problem is that nothing has been built to replace what's been removed. The bureau and the new private operator, Arizona-based Pensus Group, have promised new facilities and new recreational opportunities, but crippling delays have hindered those plans. The bureau and Pensus are now in mediation to work out a new redevelopment schedule. If this fails, the bureau may pursue terminating the Pensus contract, which runs until 2040, and find another operator.

Little at Lake Berryessa has ever gone according to plan. Recreation wasn't a part of the original plan for the lake, which had been conceived as a source of water for agriculture and cities in Solano County. Yet, by the summer of 1958, a year after Monticello Dam's completion, the lake had 800 boats on it, despite the lack of boat ramps or proper access roads. That's when the Bureau of Reclamation contracted with Napa County to have the county assume management of the lake's recreation.

"We weren't in the recreation business," Lucero said. "We were in the dam-building business. Whenever Reclamation has to manage recreation, our first option is to have someone else do it."

A year later, the National Parks Service produced Lake Berryessa's original public-use plan. The plan envisioned the lake as a recreational Shangri-La, drawing droves of tourists from Sacramento and the Bay Area. Day-use sites for picnicking would be built, while the resorts could host longer stays. Boating, hiking, camping, fishing and nature-watching would be the main, family-oriented recreational uses. A four-lane highway would be needed to support all the visitor traffic.

The federal government, however, provided no money to fund the plan and Napa County couldn't afford the cost, so the county solicited private concessionaires to build and run the resorts. The county signed 30-year contracts with each one. To finance their projects, the concessionaires leased spaces to owners of trailers and mobile homes whose extended stays would provide year-round revenue beyond the peak tourist season. The trailers weren't a part of the original plan, but they sprang up along the western shore and stayed there for the next four decades.

"The (original plan) was a great document for public-use planning purposes, but it kind of went sideways," Lucero said.

Napa County managed recreation until 1975, when it handed it off to Reclamation. When the U.S. General Accounting Office and the Department of Interior pressured the bureau to get the resorts to improve their trailer-park atmospheres, they added campgrounds, but stashed them in the worst areas, Lucero said. It was hard to get the resorts to do more because of the contracts the county had agreed to decades earlier, Lucero added.

In the early 2000s, with the contracts expiring at the end of the decade, the bureau overhauled recreation at Lake Berryessa, creating a plan that aligns more closely with the original vision from 1959, Lucero said. Removing the trailers opened up land for public use, with the goal of fostering short-term visitors to the lake who would have diverse recreational options.

"Their intent was to have a seamless transition. Well, this process has been anything but. We just haven't seen it yet," said Stu Williams, a Berryessa resident.

The Bureau of Reclamation started the bidding process on the new resort contracts in 2007, but that effort hit its first hiccup soon after. Federal lawyers determined that the bureau wasn't following the law, causing the whole process to be thrown out and started anew. By the time the second process started, in 2009, many of the resorts' contracts had expired. When the bureau and Pensus signed the new contract in April 2010, the resorts were already shut down.

“Those contracts expired and there was nothing we could do,” Lucero said.

U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, has blasted Reclamation’s management of the situation, asking that the Bureau of Land Management, which manages wilderness land north of the lake, take over.

“Enough is enough,” Thompson told a congressional subcommittee in May. “Reassurances and placations from the Bureau of Reclamation that they’re fixing the problem are no longer enough. We need the matter resolved.”

Lucero said Reclamation remains committed to its plan for the lake. “For 50 years this was kind of an exclusive site. It was kind of an unknown jewel. There wasn’t a lot of public use here,” he contends. Lucero said he imagines a future in which Lake Berryessa is marketed as a part of a “destination Napa” package.

“Before, you never had a nexus between Lake Berryessa and Napa,” said Drew Lessard, a Reclamation deputy area manager. “This mediation with Pensus — we’re getting through that.”

More changes could be on the horizon. Thompson and U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., have sponsored two bills in Congress that would create a National Conservation Area designation stretching from Snow Mountain, in the Mendocino National Forest, to the lake. Carol Kunze, the Napa director for Tuleyome, a conservation group pushing the bill, said the conservation area would help serve visitors with an interest in outdoor recreation. Kunze envisions a series of hiking trail corridors that are currently lacking around the lake. More importantly, focusing on the lake’s natural resources could help diversify its visitors, bringing in more people during the off-season months before and after summer, she said.

Kunze, who lives at the lake, said she believes the conservation designation will be a positive benefit to a lake community suffering so much negativity. “If we can get concessionaires redeveloped and get the trail systems created, maybe one day people in the Bay Area will pay attention to Lake Berryessa,” Kunze said. “We are really never mentioned unless it’s something negative.”

George Gamble, a rancher who lives on the east side of the lake, disagrees, and questions the benefits of the designation. “This would be like a piece of Swiss cheese,” Gamble said of the map of the National Conservation Area (NCA), which includes pockets of land in Mendocino, Lake, Yolo and Napa counties. “My feeling is they should keep the NCA north of Napa County. I think it’s a mistake doing it here in Napa County.”

Whatever happens in Washington, D.C., Williams said he hopes Berryessa never loses its down-home, blue-collar character, where residents feel comfortable sitting on one another’s front porches. He’s lived at locations throughout the Bay Area, but didn’t find that kind of warmth until he came to Lake Berryessa, Williams said. He added he owns properties in the Bay Area that he and his wife still maintain, but the lake always draws them back.