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## *Women are leaders in water industry*

By **Stephanie Hastings and Amy Steinfeld**

On Nov. 1-2, we convened the second California H2O Women Conference — a meeting of 150 of California's top women in the water industry at the Ritz-Carlton Bacara.

The women-only conference brought together leading professionals representing all sectors of the industry to address the most pressing issues facing California's water supply and provide a forum for women to collaborate, coordinate, educate and support each other in advancing in the water industry.

There's no doubt that women remain underrepresented at the top of business in the United States, and the water industry is no exception. But something encouraging and possibly even unique to the water space is happening. Women now lead the state's water regulatory agencies, as well as public and private water entities, consulting firms and environmental NGOs.

Brenda Burman, the first woman to head the Bureau of Reclamation since its creation in 1902, kicked off the conference with a discussion of reclamation's infrastructure in the 17 western states. She detailed the administration's bold vision for increasing water supply reliability and resiliency by elevating dams to create additional storage space to capture wet year rains and by modifying project operations to prepare for continued and increased drought conditions.

Burman inspired the attendees by sharing her career path from park ranger, to water lawyer, to leader of the nation's largest wholesale water supplier and second largest producer of hydropower. She shared her recommendations about the skills needed to be successful in the industry, including the importance of being able to communicate with government and the public. As reflected by recent studies, she affirmed the importance of water issues to the public.

Conference panel discussions focused on the ways in which the industry needs to adapt to ensure the sustainability and resiliency of our water supplies in the light of an uncertain future.

A diverse panel of water reuse experts detailed how recycled water has moved from the fringe to a critical component of a diversified water supply portfolio, supplementing local and imported water supplies and increasing the reliability of water supplies to hedge against increasingly volatile precipitation patterns. The panel addressed key trends, regulatory priorities and goals, as well as legal issues and other challenges to maximizing the reuse of water supplies.

With implementation of the most significant piece of water resources legislation in 100 years well underway, a panel of groundwater professionals explored how newly created Groundwater Sustainability Agencies are com-

municating with their stakeholders and developing innovative solutions to ensure the sustainability of groundwater supplies, including treatment of brackish groundwater, water trading programs, construction of recharge basins and the purchase of supplemental supplies.

The "Business of Water" panel included chief executives in the industry. They shared how the confluence of the impacts of climate change on supply and demand, aging infrastructure, evolving regulatory landscape, and innovation and technology are yielding exciting challenges and opportunities for doing business in California. The panelists also shared strategies to mentor and elevate women into leadership positions.

A panel of climate change specialists discussed how California's water supplies are already being impacted. As highlighted by the United Nations' latest climate change report, the panelists agreed that avoiding the direst consequences on water supplies and natural and manmade infrastructure necessitates an immediate and drastic departure from the status quo. This panel addressed state and local efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate

change and stressed the importance of communicating climate science and translating it into action items for water managers.

Finally, the "Technology and Innovation" panel explained how the recent drought and resulting conservation regulations sparked innovation in the water space. Water technology now has the attention of venture capital and private equity funds. This panel explored the latest water conservation and water quality technology for farmers and urban users alike, discussed how to incentivize investments, overcome hurdles to expedite funding of infrastructure improvements and addressed how technology and innovation can break down the barriers facing disadvantaged communities.

Water leaders from Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties joined water professionals and elected officials from around the state and country (and as far away as Israel) to participate in the conference's numerous forums for discussion and collaboration. Conference attendees agreed that while no silver bullet will solve all our water problems, our state and local governments have taken significant steps to safeguard these precious supplies.

But the work is far from done. Opportunities abound in the areas of improved management, policy, and advancing technology and efficiency. The continued pressures on our local and imported water supplies present a unique opportunity for all "California H2O Women" to play a leading role in managing and protecting the water supply so vital to one of the world's and nation's largest economies.

• *Santa Barbara-based water attorneys Stephanie Hastings and Amy Steinfeld are shareholders with Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, LLP.*

### Perspective