 Click to Print[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## Struggle for water is brewing in desert

---

### Neighbor battles plan to tap aquifer for resort

By David Hasemyer

STAFF WRITER

November 12, 2006

In a land toasted by sunshine 350 days a year, water is a commodity to be prized, conserved and fought over – and that's exactly what's happening in the middle of the Anza Borrego desert, where a battle is shaping up between a prickly desert dweller and the Borrego Water District.

Ocotillo Wells resident Mike Hussey is preparing to take on the water district if it goes forward with a plan to drill wells near his home in order to irrigate an 18-hole golf course in Borrego Springs. He said the wells will suck his 30 acres dry and leave him with an uninhabitable expanse of sand.

The dispute involves complex legal and scientific questions about aquifers, watersheds and underground strata. But to Hussey, the key question is whether the water district has the right to ship the water to Borrego Springs.

“It's mine. It's not theirs to water a golf course with,” said Hussey, a retired crane operator from Imperial Beach.

The clash began earlier this year when the district began negotiating with owners of the Montesorio resort to find a new source of water for their sprawling community of homes, vacation rentals and a four-star golf course that has hosted the U.S. Open Qualifying Tournament.

The plan calls for three wells to be drilled on property the water district owns west of Ocotillo Wells, near the intersection of Borrego Springs Road and state Highway 78. The land is 8 miles from the resort and located over the same aquifer Hussey and his neighbors draw from.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune

The Montesorio desert resort and its four-star golf course in Borrego Springs need a new source of water. The Borrego Water District's plans to tap into a new aquifer have met with opposition from an Ocotillo Wells resident.

If the deal is made, the resort will pay for the drilling and for a pipeline that will carry an estimated 1,000 gallons a minute to the resort.

The water would replace what the resort now draws from the overtapped Borrego aquifer, the district's main source of water. In the last fiscal year, Montesoros' golf course consumed more than twice as much water as the rest of the resort.

The aquifer is essentially a bowl under the desert that collects water from the surrounding mountains. For the past 50 years, more water has been siphoned from the bowl than has trickled back through rain and runoff. The water district's general manager, Russ Fogarty, said the bowl could run dry in as few as 35 years.

Part of Fogarty's job is finding and conserving enough water to supply Borrego Springs' businesses and its 3,000 residents. He said the transfer of water from Ocotillo Wells to Borrego Springs could be a step in that direction.

“We don't even know if it's feasible,” he said. “That's what we're trying to find out.”

Hussey doesn't quarrel with the district's ownership of the land or its water rights. What sets him off is the plan to pipe the water to the country club.

The Ocotillo aquifer isn't part of the Borrego aquifer, a point Hussey said is vital to understanding his contention that the district has no right to tap into the source of his water to keep the resort's golf course green, its man-made lakes filled and its decorative fountains bubbling.

His position is based on his interpretation of state and federal statutes that govern water rights. He believes that water pumped from an aquifer must be used on that land. He's confident the law is on his side.

“It says you cannot take water away from the boundary of the aquifer it was drawn from,” he said.

Fogarty agrees that the water planned for possible use by Montesoros, the former Rams Hill Country Club and Golf Resort, will be drawn from a pool of water outside the Borrego aquifer.

He calls this aquifer “contiguous” to the Borrego aquifer but says they are linked by the Santa Rosa Mountains watershed. That's enough of a connection to defeat Hussey's argument, he thinks.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune  
Ocotillo Wells resident Mike Hussey says the water district's plan to drill wells near his home would dry up his 30 acres in the Anza Borrego desert, rendering them uninhabitable.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune  
Mike Hussey (right) worked on his 30 acres in the Anza Borrego desert, where the Borrego Water District is seeking relief for its dwindling water supply by tapping into an aquifer used by Hussey and his neighbors.

Fogarty declined to discuss the subtle legal points raised by Hussey, saying any legal talk should be left to district lawyers when the time comes.

“We need to look at all of our options for water sources,” he said. “We're not trying to steal anything.”

Hussey doesn't believe that.

“It's a water grab, pure and simple,” he said. “Their attitude is if they take the water and Ocotillo Wells dries up, well that's just tough.”

Hussey said he is ready to fight for every drop. The desert is his home, and the water under his land is his lifeblood.

“I like it out here where it's just me and the snakes,” he said. “If they take my water away, they take away my home.”

Fogarty doesn't want a fight. But he understands Hussey's passion for protecting his water.

“Water is gold here,” he said. “We are desperate to conserve that resource.”

The water district estimates that each year 70 percent of the valley's water is used for agriculture, 20 percent for golf courses and 10 percent for homes and businesses.

To expand and preserve its water supply, the district has tried to buy farmland and let it go to dust. There were no takers. It has offered to store water for other water agencies for a cut of that water. No one was interested in that idea, either.

The district has even tried to eradicate the pesky tamarisk trees that suck up thousands of gallons of water apiece.

“We've got to do something,” Fogarty said. “Water is the biggest asset we have in the desert, and we are ever depleting that asset.”



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune  
Mike Hussey's spread in Ocotillo Wells would dry up, the desert dweller contends, if the area's water source is accessed and piped to nearby Borrego Springs for use at the Montesorro resort.

---


■David Hasemyer: (619) 542-4583; [david.hasemyer@uniontrib.com](mailto:david.hasemyer@uniontrib.com)

[»Next Story»](#)

---

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20061112/news\\_2m12water.html](http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20061112/news_2m12water.html)

 **Click to Print**

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co. ? A Copley Newspaper Site