CSUSB's Water Resources Institute opens the faucets on decades of data

Boykin Witherspoon, Director of the Water Resources Institute at Cal State San Bernardino talks about the institute's vast archive of resource materials Tuesday July 14, 2015. Founded in 1999, Cal State San Bernardino's Water Resources Institute brings together tens of thousands of documents from nine local water agencies, making more than a century of local water data available to the public. (Staff photo by Rick Sforza/The Sun)

By **Beau Yarbrough**, *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*

POSTED: 07/19/15, 7:53 PM PDT | UPDATED: 1 DAY AGO0 COMMENTS

SAN BERNARDINO >> How deep would you have had to dig to reach water in your neighborhood in 1963? Where were the streams the city of San Bernardino paved over decades ago? What do we know about the local water quality when your parents were children?

The Water Resources Institute at Cal State San Bernardino knows the answer.

Hidden away on the fourth floor of the Pfau Library, the institute brings together tens of thousands of documents from nine local water agencies, making up to a century of local water data available to the public.

"It's the largest collection on the Santa Ana Watershed," said Suzie Earp, archives manager for the institute. It may even been the largest collection of data relating to water in Southern California.

The institute is working on digitizing all that data, but there are so many documents that employees and the up

to 80 paid interns each year are still in the process of just cataloging much of it, 15 years after the institute first opened its doors. And recently, the Salton Sea Authority has made its records available to the institute's satellite office at the CSUSB Palm Desert campus.

"When it's part of the CSU library, it's available in perpetuity," said Boykin Witherspoon, the institute's director. "It's a lot of reports from agencies and also individual engineers."

The center's data has been used by academics, regulators and, of course, lawyers. In at least one case, according to Witherspoon, both sides of a water dispute pointed to the same page of the same document from the institute's records as proof of their claim.

The institute itself is impartial, Witherspoon said, and serves to provide unbiased data and not advocacy.

Witherspoon and Earp hope the data available at the institute will help those working to solve Southern California's water woes learn from a past that, in many cases, they used to be unaware of.

"It's history repeating itself," Witherspoon said, referring to one proposed water project. "They (first) proposed that in 1942."

The data also provides a bigger picture for agencies that sometimes don't pay attention to much beyond their own political boundaries.

"Engineers, they can solve anything, but there's often unintended consequences," Witherspoon said.

Advertisement

The "lakes" in the San Bernardino Mountains, for instance, are all man-made and were created as reservoirs. It was only later that officials and businessmen realized their recreational possibilities, which now so much of the economy around Big Bear Lake depends upon, for instance.

"Now these documents are accessible," Earp said. "Anyone from the public can come and look at them."

Steve Mains, a Riverside-based hydrologist, has used WRI data for years.

"I've been out here in the water business for 40 years and agreements that were written over 100 years ago are still on the front page of the newspaper today," he said.

Earp recently got him documents on old canals and easements from 1929. WRI documents help customers like Mains identify mysterious structures found during construction processes.

"The project would have been a no-go without it," Mains said. "Going back to these primary sources is invaluable."

For more information, visit WRI.CSUSB.edu or call (909) 537-7681.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beau covers education and politics for The Sun and the Inland Valley Daily Bulletin. Reach the author at Beau.Yarbrough@langnews.com or follow Beau on Twitter: @lby3.