

# Water district talk hits nerve

## Bakman customers protest Fresno's bid for takeover.

By Mark Grossi / The Fresno Bee

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"Fresno water is horrid! We don't want our water ruined."

The emotional statement is among protest e-mails from Bakman Water District customers who again fear Fresno will take over the 56-year-old private company on the city's southeastern flank.

Such a takeover is a recurring nightmare for some of the 13,000 people in the district, which the city tried unsuccessfully to seize and purchase more than 17 years ago.

About 100 district customers appeared at City Hall to defeat the idea that time.

Customers are upset again after the city in February released an environmental document about buying the system from an unwilling owner through a process called eminent domain. The report basically says no environmental problems would be created by a takeover.

In the coming months, the City Council is expected to discuss the water district and the takeover alternative, which will no doubt dredge up the deeper history between owner Tim Bakman and the city.

District customers are focused on the takeover, e-mailing their feelings to council members.

For example, Phil and Julie Kiser wrote the "horrid" comment about Fresno's water.

They added: "As 27-year customers of Bakman...we oppose the city of Fresno's attempts to acquire Bakman through any means, ANY means. Leave Bakman water alone!!!"

Bakman is feuding with Fresno over a toxic plume spreading into the private district from a 1950s-era air base within the city.

Fresno officials have known about it since the 1980s.

Bakman contends the city's plan has been to take over his district, hook up to the larger Fresno system and clean up the plume using his wells.

He said he just wants the plume cleaned up and his district left alone.

After years of frustrating efforts to have the city stop the plume, he sued Fresno in 2001.

He settled the lawsuit this year, saying it was becoming too costly and the cleanup talks appeared to be moving forward.

"There's some progress being made," Bakman said. "But now we find out there's this report about taking us over. I don't want to give up this water district. It's not for sale. The city can't serve my customers like I can."

City officials said their priority is public safety. In a prepared statement, they said the Bakman system would be seized and purchased only as a last resort after further study and talks with Bakman.

"Any such action would be taken during a publicly noticed, open session," the statement said.

Bakman said his district would have been better off if the city had stopped the contamination years ago when officials discovered it coming from the old Hammer Field at Fresno Yosemite International Airport. Degreasers and solvents used on aircraft decades ago had seeped into the ground.

Some Bakman wells now have been tainted by a suspected carcinogen called trichloroethylene, or TCE, in the plume. The contamination has not reached the threshold to make it dangerous yet, state officials have said.

"But the longer they drag their feet, the more the plume spreads and the more risk for my district," he said.

The city, along with Boeing International and the Army Corps of Engineers, is responsible for the cleanup. All three have been working and negotiating privately with one another in a committee since the early 1990s.

State officials say it is not unusual for cleanups to take many years when three entities are dividing millions of dollars in costs.

The groups are working with the state Department of Toxic Substances Control, which filed a cleanup plan last year. Project manager Peter MacNicholl said new wells will be drilled to extract tainted water, and a treatment facility will clean the water.

"The work could begin by the end of the year, but we need to make sure all the funding is in place before we have a specific startup time," he said.

There are other issues besides the cleanup, such as water pressure for customers and emergencies, city documents show. The environmental report on the possible takeover said the city could ensure adequate water pressure.

The report also said the district pumps water from underground but has no program to replenish the underground water in its 2-square-mile area.

The city's water system, which completely surrounds Bakman, has a program to percolate river water into the underground in ponds each year, the document said. But Bakman replied that he has plans for such underground recharge.

"I've been contributing money to Fresno Irrigation District's recharge program for many years," he said. "We have a program through FID, and we're working on more. This is not an issue."

Many of his customers believe the city should back off and work with Bakman. But one Bakman customer, apartment owner Shiekh Kaiuum, said he would welcome Fresno's water system.

Kaiuum said he owns apartments in Fresno and in the Bakman district. He said his Fresno bills are lower because he is on a water meter, instead of a flat rate as he is in Bakman.

"I don't know how much water I'm using in Bakman," he said. "But I know in Fresno. If the city takes over, good. It will be cheaper."