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Op-Ed: IWWVD Must Stand with the Navy to Protect Ridgecrest's Water Future

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Last month, a quiet courtroom in Orange County became the stage for one of the most consequential legal proceedings affecting the Indian Wells Valley in decades. At stake: the future of water affordability and reliability for Ridgecrest residents.

The issue centers on the Navy's Federal Reserve Right to groundwater—a right established in 1943 when Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake was created to serve national defense interests. Today, the Navy asserts it is entitled to 6,783 acre-feet per year (AFY) from the Indian Wells Valley groundwater basin. It uses under 2,000 AFY directly on base, but allows approximately 4,390 AFY to be used by the Indian Wells Valley Water District (IWWVD) to support its civilian workforce living off-base in Ridgecrest.

In 2024, the IWWVD pumped 5,899 AFY to serve Ridgecrest. Thanks to the Navy's federal water right, the District was exempt from paying replenishment fees on 4,390 AF—paying fees on only 26% of its water. That exemption saves the IWWVD, and by extension its ratepayers, millions annually.

Now that right is under threat.

Meadowbrook Farms and Searles Valley Minerals are challenging the Navy's claim. They argue the Navy's right should be limited to less than 2,000 AFY—enough for on-base needs only. If successful, the ruling would strip the IWWVD of access to 4,390 AFY of replenishment-free water. The District would then have to buy costly imported water or buy out or condemn the rights of the agricultural interests—options that would likely raise water bills dramatically for local households and businesses.

And yet, despite being the single greatest beneficiary of the Navy's water right, the IWWVD has so far remained silent. The District has until June 30, 2025 to file a legal brief in support of the Navy.

Water in the Indian Wells Valley is a zero-sum game. If the Navy's right is reduced, that water doesn't disappear and doesn't all go to the IWWVD—it will be claimed by commercial and agricultural interests with deep pockets. Meanwhile, Ridgecrest residents could face steep rate hikes, or worse, reductions in available supply.

The IWWVD Board of Directors must act now to protect the long-term interests of its customers. Supporting the Navy's established right is not just a prudent choice—it is the only defensible one for the community they serve.

If the Board refuses to support the Navy, they owe residents a transparent explanation. Silence is not neutrality. Inaction is a choice—with consequences.

The people of Ridgecrest deserve to know: Will the IWWVD defend our access to affordable water, or stand aside while it slips away?