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Cal Am employees sometimes bear brunt of water acrimony

BY GWEN MICKELSON
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

FELTON — Speaking above the soft rush of Fall Creek, Mark Sawran gazed down into a crystal-clear eddy and said, "We're lucky."

Lucky because Fall Creek and the Felton water system's other main sources — three local springs — are of such high quality that water drawn from them needs relatively little treatment before being sent to customers' taps.

But beyond Felton's redwood-shaded creeks and cold, clear artesian springs, a David-and-Goliath showdown over water has been developing over the past four years. Between the clashing factions, California American Water Co.'s local employees, many of whom have served San Lorenzo Valley residents for years, say they sometimes feel caught in the middle.

Unhappy over rate hikes and service, Felton residents have been pushing to buy their water system from the corporate owner, Cal Am. They passed an \$11 million bond by a nearly 75 percent margin to purchase it and asked to be operated by neighboring San Lorenzo Valley Water District. Cal Am, however, has maintained throughout the heated debate that the system is not for sale.

"People ask if I'm going to buy a new Mercedes-Benz with the rate increase, and I've been called a Nazi," said Sawran, 50, a systems operator who lives in Scotts Valley.

On a typical day, Sawran, a two-year Cal Am employee, performs tasks including system rounds, meter checks and leak repairs. He likes his job and says he's learned "a tremendous amount" about water treatment and distribution.

The Nazi references come with some frequency, said Sawran, because Cal Am's parent company, American Water, is owned by German conglomerate RWE. RWE is in the process of spinning off its American holdings.

Emotions run high in Felton over the issue. The water treatment plant has had feces and dead animals left in its mailbox, and one employee was shot with a BB gun while reading a meter last year, according to Cal Am spokesman Evan Jacobs.

Complaints about poor service sting for the five employees of the water treatment plant, who are on call 24 hours a day. The employees are Tom Raffaelli, network operations supervisor; system operators Sawran, John Chapin and Brenda Chargin; and office manager Joyce Malone.

The employees receive positive comments and treatment, as well, said Sawran. And while he lets most of the sour remarks roll off his back, one thing that is difficult for him to hear is that residents want a condemnation of the system because of bad service.

"I know that's not the truth," said Sawran, who said employees arrive at service calls within a half hour.

He's right, said Felton Friends of Locally Owned Water member Jim Graham. Felton FLOW is leading the charge to get the water system into private hands.

"The service issue in large part wasn't the stuff being done by the local employees," said Graham. "It's the outside contracting firm that Cal Am brings in that doesn't know the area. We're very happy with the local employees."

Also, said Graham, FLOW does not condone actions such as depositing dead animals in the plant's mailbox. "God, no," he said.

But with a number of ratepayers on edge about the water system issue, Sawran wishes some people would give the employees the benefit of the doubt.

"We're just the workers," he said. "We do no decision-making whatsoever, especially on rate increases. But we're the visible public face."

The tension doesn't make him want to leave the job, though.

"I know it's not personal," he said, "so I don't let it bother me."

Contact Gwen Mickelson at gmickelson@santacruzsentinel.com.