George Skelton
CAPITOL JOURNAL

The state's water supply is so important to risk lapdashing solutions

Sacramento races to decide which path to take for the future of Capitol water wars: no grand compromise like this, one is
that old line: "No bickering or property are
The Legislature is in a bind.

John N. Cox, who heads the Assembly water committee, says, "If we're going to ask the people of California to invest, we ought to make certain it's a good investment."

"I'm very skeptical we can do this in the next week. Perhaps we could do it in a couple of months."

However, water is such a contentious issue — fought over by fiercely competing, righteous interests and regulated by turf-protection government entities — that no bill is likely to be enacted into law this year.

Woodland, Calif., is plagued by foul smells. The periodic stench has officials turning to an odor hotline and the Nasal Ranger.

By John M. Glionna
Times Staff Writer

WOODLAND, Calif. — This town stinks. The mayor has been sniffing around for a solution. The local newspaper editor has also nosed about. An expert briefly brought in a scent-detecting device, only to find a false positive.

But nobody has solved the mysterious odor problem.

Some nights, when the wind blows just so, various stenches waft across residential areas, causing folks to hold their noses and run for the phone.

So many complained that Woodland created a 24-hour odor hotline. One caller said the aroma smelled like rotten feet. Another said it was more like sweaty socks or "terrible tennis shoes." Still another likened it to "a wet dog rolling in manure."

"It's horrible," said resident Tim Ball. "It's like driving by a cattle feed lot, sniffing the ocean at low tide and standing on an open sewage hole, all rolled into one."

This Sacramento bedroom community of 52,000 residents, where farmers' fields meet newly built subdivisions, is like many places nationwide where urban growth has brought complications to areas once strictly devoted to agriculture.

Woodland is trying to collect enough clues...
Northern California town fails the smell test

[Stench, from Page B1] to help a consultant—a sort of smell detective—create an odor map that would plot the most noxious locations and help pinpoint the source or sources of the smells.

Possible culprits, alone or combined, include fields of hay, rice and alfalfa, a tomato canner, a wastewater treatment plant, a biomass center that turns wood waste and fruit pits into energy—even the local animal shelter. Or maybe, a resident suggested, somebody is spreading too much chicken manure on the tomato plants.

So far, the town has learned this: Odor identification is a funny, inexact art. While they know that wind-borne odors can travel for many miles, they don't know if they're dealing with one smell from a single source or a variety of smells from different places—a sort of cocktail of bad odors.

Officials quickly decided that, though colorful, the descriptions used by hotline callers needed refinement. So they devised their own smell vocabulary, urging callers in a recorded message to use words such as “musty,” “mouth,” “putrid,” “swampy,” “smelly like wet hay.” To help with the odor map, callers are asked to be specific—noting the time, place and wind direction when the smell was detected.

Two dozen people have called the hotline since August. "We're hoping this doesn't turn into a mob hysteria," said Gary Wegen-er, director of public works. "Once you start talking about smells, the more people start sniffing around and saying, 'Well, gee, now that you mention it, that is an odor.'"

Woodland's most noxious smells are elusive and often short-lived.

The mayor drove around town and said he smelled something bad. That's when Jim Smith got involved. "Our mayor says it's something putrid and rather ranky," said Smith, editor of the local Daily Democrat newspaper. "So I went out with my nose to the air, but I couldn't find it. When I drive by the local cannery, it's always smelled pretty good to me. I can see the steam coming off the tower. It's always smelled like tomato sauce, and that's not bad."

Air quality specialist Dave Smith considers himself somewhat of a smell expert. But even he is baffled by some of the reports to the hotline.

"The thing with odors is that nobody agrees on them," said Smith, a supervisor at the Yolo-Solano Air Quality Management District. "It's all in the nose of the beholder. At the cannery, some people kind of enjoy a whiff of tomato soup, but others don't like it. These odors are worse. It's a rotten smell you wouldn't want in your home at night."

Mayor David M. Flory is tired of theories. He wants answers.

"I just can't understand why we can't identify this. We've got a laboratory and environmental engineers who should be able to tell us what is responsible for this," he said.

Flory said a bad smell a decade ago was pinpointed to a sugar beet factory that has since closed. At one City Council meeting back then, residents wore gas masks.

The mayor knows everyone is working hard for an answer but says that the repeated failure to identify a definitive source just isn't acceptable. "Staff memos are full of speculation," he said. "This just doesn't pass the smell test."

In August, the air quality board investigated the Pacific Coast Producers plant, which company officials call the world's largest canned tomato products facility. An inspector visited the fields where the firm spreads leftovers from tomato cleaning, including muddy water, tomato juice and salts. He detected some objectionable odors and cited the cannery for creating a public nuisance.

Pacific Coast Producers is working with the city to find the source of the problem. Mona Shulman, the company's general counsel, said the cannery has been in Woodland for half a century. The factory, in fact, is reviewing its manufacturing processes. But Shulman said the sooner the source of the smells is found, the sooner the company can stop working to defend itself against accusations of odors for which it may not be responsible.

In the spring, there's rotting algae at both the wastewater plant and storm water ponds. Summer and fall is harvest season for all kinds of local agriculture, including tomatoes. The cannery runs roughly 70 days each summer, July through September, officials say.

This year, the smell complaints spiked in August. The city and Pacific Coast Producers brought in agricultural engineer Robert Beggs.

One day, Loida Osoteo, the city's environmental services manager who monitors the hotline, called Beggs to notify him of several new complaints.

"What did they say it smelled like, vinegar or hay or what?" Beggs asked.

"Oh, I don't know, we never asked," she said. "People just said it stinks."

That's when Beggs created Woodland's odor dictionary. He also made what he called the "odor circuit," visiting problem spots with a high-tech device called a field olfactometer. The device, whose brand name is Nasal Ranger, resembles a police radar gun that is held up to the nose.

"It's kind of goofy-looking," Beggs said.

"He looked like he was from outer space," Osoteo added.

The Nasal Ranger, which quantifies odor strength, gave readings of 30 in some areas. Beggs said a person would gag at a reading of 50 or higher.

Beggs hopes to have his map completed by next month. Recently, he drove into the fields where the cannery discharges its water. "Windows up," he warned. "There's some solids here."

Standing in one vacant field, he used something akin to a wine connoisseur's lexicon to describe the odor: "It's pungent, a combination of musty with a little compost."

Tim Bair doesn't care what you call it. He's just hungry for an answer. Said the 69-year-old retired truck driver: "The smell just takes your appetite away."

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SEARCH FOR A SMELL: Several suspected sources of the smells that irritate Woodland, Calif., residents, such as the fields where a local tomato processing plant dumps wastewater, left, have been under surveillance by the Nasal Ranger, a device used to locate odors.

Robert DorseLS Los Angeles Times