



Ernest Conant Counsel

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Practice Areas

CEQA / NEPA | Endangered Species | Groundwater Law | Infrastructure | Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) | Water Law | Water Rights Litigation

Ernest Conant has been at the forefront of California water law for more than four decades, managing and resolving water resources management issues, particularly those involving water rights and supply, endangered species, and environmental challenges.

Prior to his tenure at Downey Brand, Ernest held the position of Regional Director for the California-Great Basin Region of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Mid-Pacific Region from 2019 to 2024. In this role, he spearheaded the management, development, and protection of water and related resources across California, Nevada, and Southern Oregon. Notably, he led one of the nation's largest and most complex water projects – the Central Valley Project (CVP) – which supplies water to communities and agricultural areas in northern and central California. He also oversaw Oregon's Klamath Project, Nevada's Truckee Storage projects, and California's Cachuma, Orland, Solano, and Ventura River projects.

Before joining the Bureau of Reclamation, Ernest represented water and irrigation districts, community services districts, and joint power authorities (JPAs) on a wide variety of matters, including water and infrastructure projects, from developing groundwater banking and storage projects and negotiating complex water contracts to implementing policy and legislation. He also has vast experience assisting public agencies with infrastructure project financing. Ernest participated in the drafting of California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act and has advised entities across the state regarding implementation of the Act.

Ernest is a native of Northern California and comes from a family with six generations of farming in California.

Experience

In addition to experience serving as the Regional Director of the Bureau of Reclamation, California-Great Basin Region for five years, Ernest's experience while in private practice includes:

- General Counsel for various water and irrigation districts, community service districts, and joint

powers authorities (JPAs), providing advice on legal matters and development of policy.

- Assistance with the development of various water banking and groundwater storage projects and negotiation of implementing agreements, including Kern Water Bank, Semitropic Water Banking Project, and Arvin-Edison Metropolitan Banking Project.
- Various negotiations of CVP contracts, including coordinating the negotiation of 112 CVP renewal contracts (1995).
- Special Counsel to Friant Water Authority for developing San Joaquin River Settlement Agreement, implementing legislation, and repayment conversion contracts (2006-2010).
- Assist Kern County interests with developing and implementing Monterey Amendments for the State Water Project (SWP), including environmental review, subsequent litigation, and transfer of Kern Water Bank (1994-2018).
- Negotiate and assist with the implementation of various water transfer agreements.
- Advise clients regarding the development of federal and state legislation and its implementation, including the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA) and the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).
- Assist clients in forming Groundwater Sustainability Agencies and developing Groundwater Management Plans; assist with the formation of water districts and JPAs to implement SGMA.
- Assist with groundwater adjudications and development of physical solutions.
- Assist public agencies with financing various public projects, including large infrastructure projects.

Professional & Community Service

- Association of California Water Agencies, Legal Affairs Committee and State Legislative Committee, 1990-2018
- Tulare Lake Basin Water Storage District, Board Member, 2001-2009
- Pacific Legal Foundation, Law Clerk, 1978

Education

- J.D., Pepperdine University School of Law, 1979
- B.S., California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1975

Honors & Rankings

- AV Preeminent® Rating by Martindale-Hubbell®

- Meritorious Service Award, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2024
- Distinguished Service Award, Family Farm Alliance, 2024
- Water Legacy Award, Water Association of Kern County, 2019
- California Agricultural Leadership Program, Class XV, 1984-1986
- Outstanding Senior, School of Agriculture and Natural Resources, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 1975

Speaking Engagements / Events

- *Water Banking and Leasing in the West: Practical Pointers and Pitfalls*, Presenter, Western Agricultural and Environmental Law Conference, June 19-20, 2025
- *Amid the Shifting Currents... What's Our Policy Outlook?*, Panelist, CFEE Water Conference 2024, December 12, 2024