Transcript of Video Interview with Dorothy Green, recorded 2005.

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit www.earthalert.org.

Dorothy Green on Water Issues Interview

Janet Bridgers (JB): Hi, welcome to *Heroes of the Coast*. My name is Janet Bridgers. Environmentalists are seldom involved in only one issue and I'm very happy to have as my guest today Dorothy Green, the founding president of Heal the Bay, but we're here to talk today about one of the most important issues for California, that's water. Dorothy is one of the founders now of the California Water Impact Network. Dorothy, in researching information for this program, it's been about 100 years, actually a little over 100 years since California became involved in massive water projects to bring water to Los Angeles.

Dorothy Green (DG): Yes.

JB: Are we at the end of that phase?

DG: The environmental community, for sure, would like to see that phase ended. It has been a very destructive phase. But there are those, particularly in the giant agribusiness industry, that continually wants more water, continually asking for more water, for more dams, more diversions, and we feel we've done enough destruction to our natural environment, that it's time now to begin repairing the destruction we've caused by moving water from where it's plentiful to where developers want it.

JB: Certainly those efforts have made California what it is today, one of the most powerful, as was as populated places in the country.

DG: Yeah, that's very true. The City of Los Angeles, for example, could never have grown to the…what, four million people who live in the city now without having massive amounts of imported water. The Los Angeles River on its own could maybe support at most maybe 300,000 people.

JB: That's tiny.

DG: And we've got four million in the city now, 10 million in the counties, the San Gabriel River clearly could add…I've heard estimates that maybe, with all the water resources in the county, maybe we could support a population of one million, and there are 10 million living here now, only because of how we managed our water resources.

JB: The statistics that I read is that about 75% of the water supply originates in the northern third of the state.

DG: Well, actually, for the City of Los Angeles, there are three aqueducts systems that bring water to the city, one from the Owens Valley/Mono Lake eastern side of the Sierra Nevada

Mountains. That was the first aqueduct that was built just about a hundred years ago. Then the aqueduct from the Colorado River was built mostly in the '30s and 40s, and then we built the state water project, which brought water from Northern California through to the farmers in the Central Valley, as well as to Southern California.

JB: And clearly that agriculture is very important, not just to the state, but to the country as a whole.

DG: Well, yeah. I mean California agriculture provides half of all of the fruits and vegetables for the entire country, so it's extraordinarily important, as a commodity, as a way of feeding our nation, but if you look at how much water is being used by the agricultural community, what they're growing with it, it turns out to be very instructive. Almost half of the ag water is used for four low value but water intensive crops, two of which are also subsidized, would only be grown because there are federal price supports for them. And those two are cotton and rice, and the other two are alfalfa and irrigated pasture—cattle feed.

JB: Now how does this…these facts, these are facts that we're living with and to a certain extent, we must go forward. How does that impact what you're doing now with what you refer to as CWIN?

DG: Well, CWIN organized because we see so many inequities that are built into the way water is managed. First of all, it's not managed efficiently at all. There's tremendous opportunities for using water much more efficiently than we do and second of all, there's great big press, push to try to convert water, which belongs to all of us. In the state of California, water belongs to all of us. A water right is the privilege of using that water. It's not an ownership right. But yet the giant agribusiness interests want to convert it into an ownership right so that they can market it and profit thereby, which flies in the face of our constitution and all of our laws. So one of the big issues that CWIN was formed to deal with is just to stop this push to privatize our water resources, to keep it in the public interest, to make water policy a much more open and transparent part of California government.

JB: You said that in the past it's been a "behind closed door" process.

DG: Yes.

JB: How do you envision it becoming a more open process?

DG: Well, first and foremost, we have to really inform and educate the populace about how water is managed. Right now, especially in Southern California, most people haven't a clue. They don't know what the delta is, they don't where their water comes from, they turn on the tap, and they're happy, as long as the bills aren't too high. But the most important thing is to get the populace educated and aware of what's going on, so they can demand accountability from their water agencies.

I mean most water agencies in the state have elected boards that manage them, but yet very few people know that those boards exist. If there are no challenges to directors, if people just run for

re-election and there's no challenge, then that doesn't even appear on our ballots. And so, the powers-that-be, if you will, make sure that if there is a vacancy coming up, they get somebody appointed to fill that vacancy, so there's always an incumbent running. There's very few challenges and very few opportunities for people to get involved.

And also, board meetings are open to the public, and yes, you can get information. You can get the minutes, you can go to them, but the people who show up at those board meetings are the people who have a financial interest in how that business is being run. Very few members of the public go to those meetings and understand what's going on, or care to. And that's got to be changed. Water is just too important to be left to what we call the hydraulic brotherhood to manage.

JB: So one of the great purposes then of CWIN is to get members of the public, or the grassroots, more involved in the decision-making.

DG: Exactly, exactly.

JB: Now I had a question about the California Department of Water Resources. That was formed about 50 years ago to unify a lot entities at that time. Now what role are they playing now?

DG: Their principle function is to manage the State Water Project, but they also have a planning function. They put out, every five years, a report called the California Water Plan, or Bulletin 160, that lays out how water is used in the state and what they see the future in terms of water use, but up until this past year, they have depended on all the other water agencies to just turn in their data, and then just compile it, and said, "alright, this is the water plan." But this very last time around, for the Bulletin 160-05, they really involved, for the first time, a wide group of people to come and help do this plan. And as a result, the plan itself has been a much more open, a much more inclusive document that for the first time really takes seriously the role of conservation, water reclamation and reuse, ground water management. It even gives some lip service, maybe a little more than just lip service, to global warming. That's also been a really big important issue that the state water agencies have not yet come to grips with.

JB: I'm glad you've brought that one up, because obviously…Well, I think that is the issue. It's obvious to many that there is a process of global warming and data that corroborates that, and that's going to have a big impact on our water supplies.

DG: Yes.

JB: Tell us what you know to be true about that.

DG: The fact that global warming is here and is real is evident. Where there is some disagreement and some debate as yet within the scientific community is how, specifically, it's going to affect localities, specific places. What we know in terms of California water resources is that the snow pack in the Sierra Nevadas, which is our main storage for winter snow to serve the state for the rest of the year as it melts slowly in the spring, that snow pack is going to be much less. It already does not come down as far as it used to and then it's going to run off a lot more

quickly. There's going to be a lot more rain than snow in the mountains. So that is going to run off more quickly. And a few people that are thinking seriously about what that impact means for our water supply…In fact, Governor Schwarzenegger has used it as a means of pushing for two more dams, which we certainly don't need. Nobody wants to pay the money to build them. They want the taxpayer to build them. And there's no water to put in them; but that's the governor's answer to how do we capture that storm…that snow melt as it melts earlier and faster and make it useful. It's the environmental community's or CWIN's opinion that what we really need to do is to restore the upper watersheds in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, so that moisture can be captured up high in the mountains, and soak into the ground, and so it goes gradually through the ground and out into our rivers and streams gradually, as it is now because the run off has been so swift, it has eroded some of the meadows that used to just retain water and let it soak into the ground.

JB: This gets into the work you've been doing in the last few years with the watershed council.

DG: Absolutely, because here in Los Angeles, where our rivers and creeks have been converted into concrete storm channels to get rid of the water as fast as possible, we need to reverse that. We need to reverse that whole thinking all over the state, that we need capture the storm water where it falls, and get it into the ground, so that it can be recoverable when we need it and when we want it.

JB: And how would that be done? Is it something that can be done swiftly? Are we talking about decades?

DG: That's another reason why we really need to educate people, because it really boils down to political will and our elected representatives to the legislature or to city councils, or county supervisors are not going to lean on an issue that that's big and that changing of how we think about our cities or look at how they've developed. It's going to have to take a clamor from the populace to say, "this has got to be done, this is the only thing that makes sense is that water has got to be captured and not allowed to just run off and get it into the ground so that it can be useful starting at the top of the Sierras."

JB: So we're talking about a huge California watershed, and how that is managed.

DG: Exactly, exactly.

JB: And we're talking an entire change of perspective in how it's done.

DG: Exactly. That's why we have to have this massive public education campaign and that's what CWIN is dedicated to doing. We've just now hired an executive director who will be starting that campaign within the next week and getting it going.

JB: Now one of the controversial aspects about water resources is that as much as we save is going to be used to foster development. How does CWIN interact with that phenomenon?

DG: It's very interesting because there are members of the state legislature who are really forward thinking and they passed a couple of laws a couple of years ago that speak to that very issue. First of all, Sheila Kuehl, state senator from Santa Monica/Malibu area, authored a bill, a law, now a law, that would require any development of 500 units or more, would have to spell out ahead of time exactly where the water is going to come from for the next 20 years to serve that development, even in multiple dry years.

The other law passed by, at that time Assemblyman Jim Costa, would require that water, water resources be part of general plans…

JB: They're not?

DG: No.

JB: Are you serious?

DG: Well, now they are, just now. But now the problem is how do we keep people honest in looking at those water resources and honestly reporting what they've got for dry years, multiple dry years? CWIN has filed a lawsuit, for example, against the Newhall Land Development Company because they're planning a 21,000 home development in the northern part of the county near the Santa Clarita River for which they really don't have the water to serve the populace that will move into that site.

JB: So that would be like about 60,000 people?

DG: Something like that.

JB: Which is a good-sized community.

DG: Yes. And the Castaic Lake Water Agency, in their urban water management plan, they have to also write, is counting on a water transfer from ag to the urban sector that is illegal, that has never been sanctioned by law, and yet they're saying this transfer is there and that's what's going to help to serve those 21,000 homes, but we have filed a lawsuit against the Castaic Water District, which is the main district that serves that area, as well, because what they're counting on also is that the State Water Project can deliver what is promised. When the State Water Project was first put on the ballot back in the 1970s, they went out and sold a whole bunch of contracts. They went out and asked people to sign on the dotted line for all the water they were going to deliver. Well, they signed contracts to deliver more than twice as much water as they are able to now. Those contracts were signed during the day when the environment was not an issue, when water that was allowed to run to the sea to maintain an ecosystem was thought to be wasted to the sea. And clearly…

JB: And what are some examples of where water is needed to maintain streams and wildlife?

DG: The San Francisco Bay Delta is a perfect example of…This is an inland estuary. It's a huge area that used to be a massive swamp, a wetland, an enormous wetland that was so rich with

wildlife that when the birds were startled, the sky would darken, there would be so many of them. They talked about the fish in the delta being so numerous you could walk across their backs across the river. This is where the San Joaquin River, and the Sacramento Rivers and a bunch of other smaller rivers that drain the entire great Central Valley of the state all come together in what was this huge wetland before the water goes out to San Francisco Bay and then out the Golden Gate Bridge. But over time, that huge wetland was converted into farmland. Levees were thrown up out of the dirt, just out of the levee, just out of the delta and there's now over a thousand miles of waterways and islands in that delta. But still the natural wildlife in it was extraordinarily important and valuable, but now it's on the verge of ecological collapse. I mean the little delta smelt, which is a little two- to three-inch long, little almost transparent fish, which is the basic food fish for the bigger ones, there used to be hundreds of thousands of those. Now they're on the verge of going extinct.

JB: Really?

DG: Their numbers are so low, they say that within the next year or two, they'll be extinct if we don't do something about it. And the main reason…And the same thing can be said about salmon runs. Most of the salmon is gone from the Central Valley. The whole ecosystem is on the verge of collapse, and the main reason is because we pull so much water out of that system. In a dry year, as much as 70% of the water that would normally flow through and out of the delta is diverted, either before it gets there, or it's pumped out of the delta. It pumps out. No ecosystem can tolerate that and survive.

The mighty San Joaquin River that drains the southern two-thirds of the great Central Valley is bone dry for 30 – 60 miles. Bone dry. All the water is used up by agriculture and by the cities in the Central Valley.

There's been a lawsuit recently that was just recently resolved that requires that the farmers re-water the San Joaquin River. You know the water that reaches the delta from the San Joaquin now is essentially just drainage water, off the farmland and off sewage treatment plants. Some people call it the colon of the state.

JB: Having been involved with similar issues with Heal the Bay, we won't stop us. But I mean there are major things that could be done. For example, you mentioned those four crops that take up half the agricultural water—pasture, rice, alfalfa and cotton. Well, cotton is not an essential in California. There are places in the United States where there's a lot more water to grow it. Do you think we could ban cotton growing?

DG: Politically, you have to go to the federal government and get them to eliminate the price supports and there are people that are working on it, because in terms of the World Trade Organization, there are other countries in the world that want to grow cotton and want the income from growing cotton where water is more plentiful. And so there is a move now to eliminate cotton-growing. In fact one of the biggest cotton growers in the world, J. G. Boswell, has been quoted as saying, "in ten years, we won't be growing cotton in the San Joaquin Valley. Let the Chinese grow cotton." And they are beginning now, I understand, to retire some of that land and so they're planting almonds and pistachios and other things instead. But that should free

up a lot of water. It should, because those nut crops don't take anywhere near as much water to grow successfully.

JB: Another thing. This is in the consumer sector. Why do we have turf lawns in Southern California? They look nice, but this is not England. It's not Ireland.

DG: And grass takes four times as much water as almost any other groundcover. You're right, but grass does provide kids a place to play and that's the look people are concerned about. They're beginning turf now that needs a lot less water. In fact, I planted some in front of my home.

JB: Are you pleased with it?

DG: Yeah. It looks good.

JB: But do we want to put it all on the consumers in terms of efficiency, because as we've said, then does the savings that they generate, does it just go to more homes that are going to use it up for other purposes?

DG: Well, if we're going to accommodate the kind of growth that's being projected for California, we must realize that increasing population is the third rail of United States politics. One must never talk about reducing population growth. And that's really the basic issue that we're dealing with in California. There's just too many people here. But yet, growth is the sacred mantra. I don't know how you get away from that. And in order to accommodate the growth that is going to take place unless people really get serious about reducing growth, I don't know. We have put the numbers together that shows that if we are…if we do conserve and use water much more efficiently and effectively and figure out how to get our water agencies to talk to each other and to plan coherently, which doesn't happen now, there really is enough water in the state to accommodate our growing population and to put a lot more water back into the environment, so our rivers and the delta don't have to die.

JB: So you're optimistic that this can be done.

DG: Yes, it can be done, but the political will to make it happen is going to be very difficult.

JB But that's what the purpose of CWIN is all about.

DG: Exactly.

JB: Well, this has been another delightful opportunity to spend time with you, Dorothy. You're such a visionary, and your optimism inspires the rest of us.

DG: Thank you. I appreciate being invited here.

JB: You're welcome. Viewers, thank you for joining us. And we invite you to visit the website—C-WIN.org to learn how you can become more involved in California's water issues. It's all of our future.

[end of interview]