

Mammoth, LA water districts resolve decades-old dispute

By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and the Mammoth Lakes Community Water District announced Thursday that they have reached a compromise settlement over use of the High Sierra ski town's water supply, ending a dispute whose roots reach back a century.

Under the terms, Mammoth Lakes will pay the DWP \$3.4 million now and \$2.4 million, adjusted higher for inflation, in half a century.

In return, the DWP will allow Mammoth Lakes to continue to draw its water supply from Mammoth Creek, which tumbles through town. The DWP also will drop a pair of lawsuits it filed nearly two years ago, and both sides agreed never to challenge each other's water rights.

The DWP lawsuits argued that the department has owned the water from Mammoth Creek since 1905. DWP officials said the Mammoth Lakes diversion wasn't a big concern when that community was small. But after decades of growth, which included condos and golf courses, its water diversions grew to equal 1 percent of the flows in the century-old aqueduct that carries water from the Eastern Sierra to Los Angeles.

Mammoth Lakes insisted it was entitled to as much as 2,760 acre-feet of water annually under licenses and a permit granted by the state dating to 1949. The district also argued that the DWP should not be allowed to claim the water after allowing the community to become dependent upon it for decades by relying on those licenses and permit.

The settlement gives Mammoth Lakes the right to continue to

divert up to 2,760 acre-feet of water annually from the creek, an amount both sides agree can be increased as the community grows.

The DWP will use the money contributed by Mammoth Lakes to pay for water-saving improvements designed to increase flows in the Los Angeles Aqueduct system by 1,779 acre-feet of water annually.

“The Mammoth Lakes community is assured of the water it needs to flourish,” DWP General Manager Ron Nichols said in a statement, adding that the water conservation efforts the community pays for would in effect replace water used by the district.

Tom Smith, president of the Mammoth Community Water District board, said in a statement that the board appreciates “the rational approach that L.A. DWP took in resolving these matters. Even though this is a minimal amount of water for L.A., it is critical to our community’s future.”

The district serves 7,700 year-round residents who are largely working-class employees catering to vacationers from Los Angeles, which is about 300 miles south.