

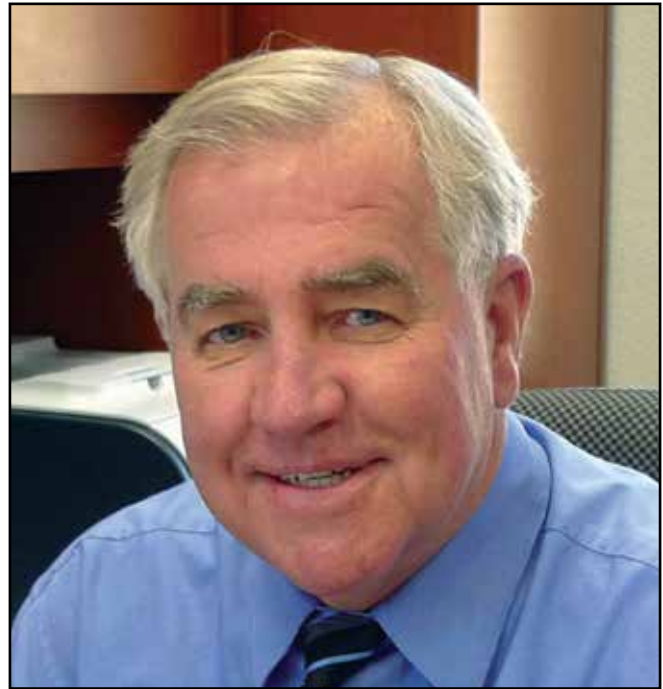
# Jim Abercrombie, El Dorado Irrigation District General Manager

**E**l Dorado Irrigation District (EID) is a water utility serving 110,000 residents in northern California's El Dorado County. EID provides drinking water for homes, schools, and businesses and recycled water to irrigate yards and landscapes. About 2 percent of EID's customer base remains agricultural, serving vineyards and orchards of apples, pears, and peaches. EID also owns and manages outdoor recreation sites, including Sly Park Recreation Area, which features 191 individual campsites and large group areas.

Much of EID's water originates in the Sierra Nevada Mountains at an elevation of 8,200 feet. EID diverts some of that high mountain water through tunnels to lower elevation reservoirs as part of a well-integrated system to hedge against dry years. That water delivery system comprises 1,295 miles of pipeline, 50 miles of canals and ditches, 5 treatment plants, 36 storage reservoirs, and 38 pump stations. Two hundred pressure-regulating zones are required for reliable operation.

EID holds some of the most senior water rights on the American River, as well as a portfolio of rights dating as far back as the 1800s. The project was originally built back in the 1920s to support hydropower generation and gold mining, and it subsequently developed to water the region's agricultural lands. Housing developments exploded in the early 1990s, and in the last 10 years, EID has added 20,000 new customers. So the district has had to transition from agricultural to municipal and industrial (M&I) delivery over a relatively short period of time.

At the helm of EID's staff of 220 is Jim Abercrombie. Jim has more than 30 years of management experience, including 11 years as Amador Water Agency's general manager and 20 years at Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E). Prior to joining EID, he served as PG&E's El Dorado County district manager. Irrigation Leader's senior writer, John Crotty, spoke with Jim about the unique challenges of an urbanized district, his management philosophy, and his approach to planning for the future.



EID General Manager Jim Abercrombie

**John Crotty:** Please describe your work as general manager of EID.

**Jim Abercrombie:** I have typical general manager responsibilities, but EID is different from a typical irrigation district. EID began as an irrigation district, but now we have five business lines: water supply, wastewater management, water recycling, recreation, and hydropower operations.

We supply 40,000 service accounts in El Dorado County, primarily along the Highway 50 corridor. We provide wastewater services to 20,000 accounts, and provide recycled water in the El Dorado Hills area—not only for golf courses, but also for front and back yard landscaping. There is an incentive for developers to provide grey water; they can build twice as many units per water allocated to the development. EID employees verify that there are no cross connections and ensure that backflow prevention devices are working. That subjects EID to a variety of regulatory bodies, including the California Department of Public Health and the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board.

**John Crotty:** How did you get your start in the water business, and what brought you to EID?

**Jim Abercrombie:** I am a registered civil engineer, and I hold a master's in business administration. Engineers like utilities because of the challenge of building things. The MBA helped me on the finance side. I started my career with PG&E, managing gas and electric facilities. I was there for 21 years. After a reorganization, I decided to leave and took a job with the Amador Water Agency, switching from gas and electric to water and wastewater. The EID position opened up 4 years ago, and I applied. That is how I ended up here.

A lot of people ask me how I transitioned from gas and electric to water. It is pretty easy. You still have a customer base, you still have infrastructure to build and maintain, and you still have rates and billing. Only the commodities, and some of the risks associated with them, are different.

**John Crotty:** What have been your biggest challenges as manager of EID?

**Jim Abercrombie:** Managing infrastructure replacement and regulatory compliance on the wastewater side of the business. The key question is, "How do you reinvest in infrastructure without creating high rates?" As we move from an agricultural district to an M&I district, a lot of customers have moved from highly populated areas with economies of scale and relatively low rates. Our district varies in elevation over a large area, so we don't have that same density. Trying to manage expectations and perceptions in this context is a challenge. Our hydroelectric facility supplies one-third of our water supply to our customers and has the benefits of keeping rates lower.

**John Crotty:** What are you most proud of as manager of EID?

**Jim Abercrombie:** First, the employees. As public servants providing water and wastewater, our staff is hardworking and is dedicated to providing the best service possible to our customers. The second is our culture. All our employees want to achieve excellent results, whether it is customer satisfaction, minimizing water service outages, or reducing sanitary sewer overflows. They take ownership of everything they do in the district. We do a lot of performance management and employee efficiency goals. We are one of the most efficient operations in the region.

**John Crotty:** Describe the importance of hydropower to your district and how it impacts your decisionmaking.

**Jim Abercrombie:** Our hydroelectric system is extremely important to the district. It is really a water supply project with the ancillary benefits of power



**EID uses nearly 50 miles of canals, ditches, and flumes (pictured is a section of Flume 49/50) to convey water from high in the Sierra.**

generation. We own four lakes in the high mountains that supply about one-third of our drinking water. In addition, we own 17,000 acre-feet of water rights. Our total revenue—rate and nonrate—is about \$70 million a year, and we make \$8 million to \$10 million from hydroelectric generation. So, approximately 10 percent of our total revenue comes from nonrate revenue. If we didn't have that facility, we would still have to get that drinking water down here, and those costs would be borne by our customers. The facility not only offsets costs to our customers, it gives us control over the future of additional water rights.

**John Crotty:** What makes for a successful relationship with a board of directors?

**Jim Abercrombie:** Honest and respectful communication. If the board has questions, or is interested in moving in a certain direction, you research it and you provide an honest and respectful answer. Beyond normal board meetings, we go through a performance management system; I report to the board on key performance measures and how we are achieving goals and objectives. We measure customer satisfaction through surveys. There are many performance measures, including the number of outages per mile of line and the duration of water outages. I have also implemented a system of key

principles to guide our operations: absolute commitment to safety, respect for the individual, excellent customer service, and fiscal responsibility.

**John Crotty:** Where do you want to see EID in the future?

**Jim Abercrombie:** We'll still see some growth pressures here but remain predominantly M&I. I believe our community and our board are committed to providing the agricultural community with water that is priced as reasonably as possible. Our community likes the rural atmosphere and the quality of life associated with the orchards and vineyards.

Because of that high-growth rate, we did do a lot of reinvestment in our infrastructure. That will likely taper off, and infrastructure replacement will become much more manageable. To keep costs reasonable and still provide the high level of service our customers demand, we are going to try to find efficiencies wherever we can in areas such as automation and outsourcing certain business functions.

**John Crotty:** How does the development of the next generation of water leaders fit into that future?

**Jim Abercrombie:** Looking at the demographics of our employee base, we will likely see 30 percent of our employees retire in the next five years. Many of them are senior water or wastewater operators. There will be a lot of change. We are developing our employees today in anticipation of that.

For example, two of our senior managers train students on water and wastewater at the local college with the aim that they get into the business. We worked with the college to create the program. It is a great way to develop the water workforce.

To be in a leadership position, you have to have a set of principles and have a performance management system in place that sets clear goals and objectives. If your employees know what they are expected to do, they can do great things. We provide a training program for our employees to improve interviewing and resume-writing skills. EID also offers a tuition reimbursement program for continuing education.

**John Crotty:** What is the one piece of advice you would share with other district managers?

**Jim Abercrombie:** Don't take life so seriously—enjoy life, enjoy your work, and enjoy your employees. I wish I had learned that a little earlier.



**EID's El Dorado Hills water treatment plant is one of five treatment facilities in the district.**



**Recycled water is produced at EID's El Dorado Hills (pictured) and Deer Creek wastewater treatment plants. Pipes that convey recycled water are colored purple, from the treatment plant all the way to the recycled water users' landscapes.**



**EID's El Dorado Hills wastewater treatment plant also includes a 1-megawatt solar facility that saves up to \$250,000 a year on the district's electricity bills.**