

IN THE FLOW

Alumnus Oversees Operations for MWD, Nation's Largest Treated Water Provider



By MELANIE JOHNSON

Brent Yamasaki, architect.

That's what his business card might have read had a high school counselor not encouraged him to also sign up for a career day talk on engineering.

Decades later, Yamasaki ('89, mechanical engineering) serves as the chief of operations for the Metropolitan Water District (MWD), Southern California's regional water wholesaler and the largest provider of treated water in the nation.

"I think the most rewarding aspect of my job is the important role that we play for Southern California in bringing reliable, high quality water to the region," he says. "We operate the Colorado River Aqueduct along with five regional treatment plants and a large network of reservoirs and pipelines. We've had record drought and not enough water, and we have had El Niño and too much water. There's never a dull moment."

MWD serves 26 member agencies throughout the Southern California region, collectively serving a customer base of 19 million people across six counties: Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Ventura, Riverside and San Bernardino.

"Because of drought, people are much more aware of how important water is today, but before I started at MWD 30 years ago, I didn't think of it as being an interesting place to work," he says. "But it turned out to be a fascinating place to work."

In 1997, Yamasaki took on a role as a construction and startup engineer on one of the largest projects in MWD's history – Diamond Valley Lake. The husband and father of three commuted daily from his home in Huntington Beach to Hemet for four years to work on the reservoir, which includes three earth-filled dams made with layers of clay and rock that can hold 810,000 acre-feet of water, which is more water than Lake Havasu on the Colorado River holds.

The \$2 billion project, which is the largest reservoir in Southern California, was completed in 2000 and serves to provide a reserve storage of water for droughts and other emergencies.

More than two decades after its completion, Yamasaki says he still gets excited about the project, often taking photos of Diamond Valley Lake when he visits.

"It never gets old," he says. "It is such a career-defining project, not just for me, but for hundreds of people who worked on it."

Yamasaki credits the education and hands-on experience he received at Cal Poly Pomona with helping to develop his penchant for problem solving.

"That's what I gravitated towards at MWD," he says. "That education gave me a solid foundation. My team and I really like to problem solve, and there's always a sense of accomplishment when we are able to tackle the wide variety of challenges we face."

"We've had record drought and not enough water, and we have had El Niño and too much water. There's never a dull moment."