Bay Area Water Taste Test
Restore Hetch Hetchy
July 2025

Overview

Restore Hetch Hetchy is committed to restoring the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park while ensuring continued water and power reliability for all communities that rely on the Tuolumne River.

Some opponents and skeptics of restoration have asserted that the quality of San Francisco's water is exceptional, and that the City's residents and customers will be forced to drink inferior water when Hetch Hetchy Reservoir is relocated and Tuolumne River supplies are diverted from other locations.

Restore Hetch Hetchy agrees that San Francisco's water is high quality, and we maintain it will still be good when Hetch Hetchy Valley is restored. We believe residents will experience no noticeable difference in water quality.

To test this assumption, we conducted taste comparisons between San Francisco's water and other high-quality local supplies from the East Bay and Marin County. The results confirmed our expectations.

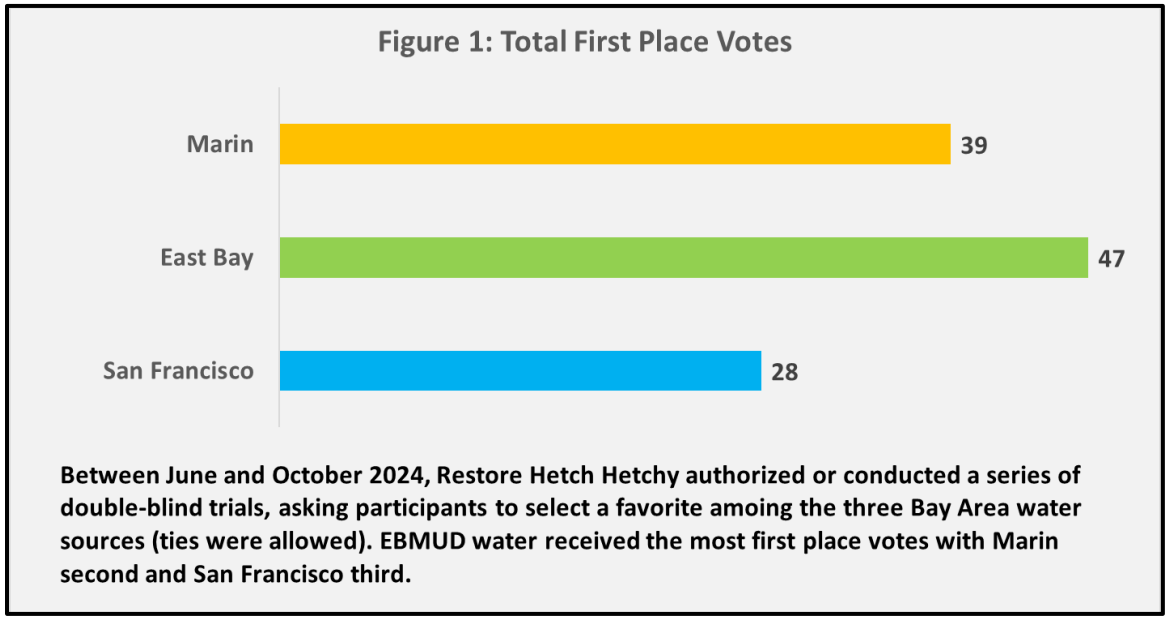
In a series of double blind taste tests, most respondents actually preferred East Bay and Marin water to San Francisco water. These findings indicate that water quality should not be a primary concern in debates over restoring the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park.

Summary

In 2024, Restore Hetch Hetchy retained graduate students from the University of Colorado through its Capstone Program to design and initiate a double-blind water taste test to evaluate preferences of Bay Area residents.

In a series of trials conducted between June and October, the Capstone Team and Restore Hetch Hetchy asked participants to compare water supplies delivered by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC, often colloquially called "Hetch Hetchy" water) with supplies delivered by the East Bay Municipal Utilities District (EBMUD) and the Marin Municipal Water District (MMWD). Participants ranked the taste of the three sources based on personal preference, with ties permitted.

A majority of participants preferred the taste of East Bay or Marin water to that of San Francisco. Out of 114 first place votes, 47 people (41%) selected East Bay water as best, 39 people (34%) selected Marin water as best, and 28 people (25%) selected San Francisco water as best. The results challenge the perception that 'Hetch Hetchy' water is superior. See Figure 1.



Methodology

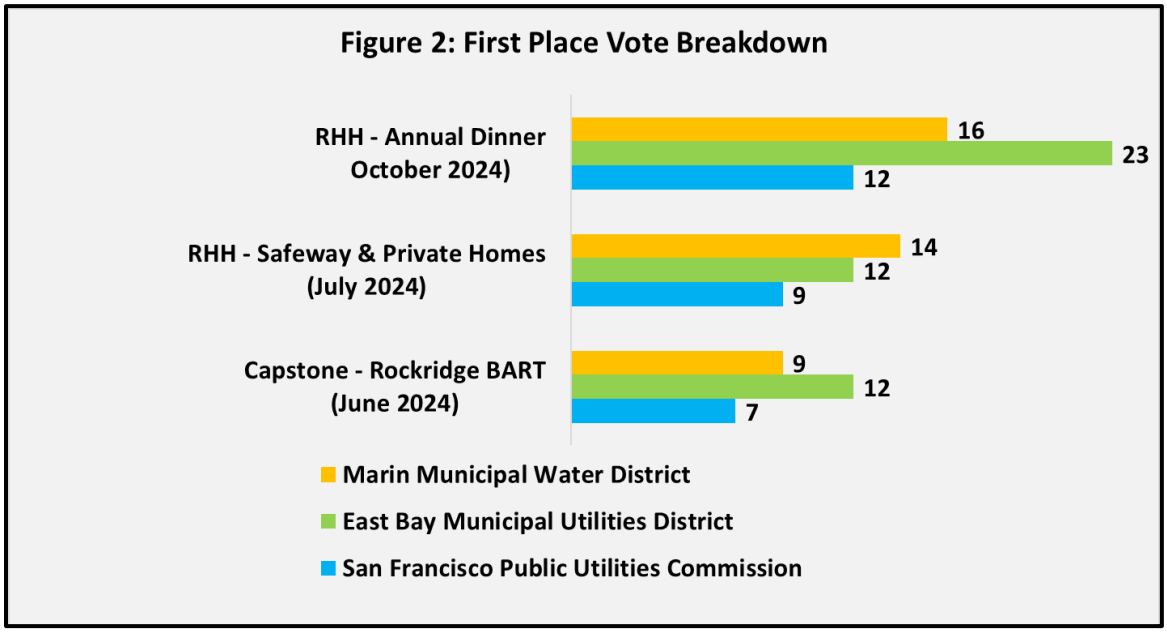
The taste test took place in 3 phases:

1. In June, samples were collected at the SFPUC and EBMUD headquarters and from a Mexican restaurant in Larkspur (staff at the MMWD declined to provide samples for the test.). The University of Colorado Capstone Team, who designed the test, collected the opinions of passersby at the Rockridge BART station in Oakland. The Capstone Team's Findings and their Methodology and Recommendations are included as Appendices A and B.
2. In July, samples were collected from private homes in San Mateo County (90% SFPUC water), Oakland (EBMUD) and Fairfax (Marin). The samples were offered to passersby at Safeway in Oakland and in private homes. These samples were also sent to Tap Score, an independent lab, for detailed analysis (see Appendices C (SFPUC), D (EBMUD) & E (MMWD).
3. In October, samples were collected from the same private homes in San Mateo County, Oakland and Fairfax. The water was offered to people attending Restore Hetch Hetchy's Annual dinner on October 26 – as soon as they arrived and before they consumed any other food or beverage.

All testing followed a double-blind protocol: neither tasters nor test administrators knew which sample came from which source. Further, all taps were flushed before filling glass bottles, and all samples were kept at room temperature.

Testing and Results

A breakdown of the results from the separate trials reflecting the variability of responses is provided in Figure 2. Note that the exact mix of sources in any utility's supply varies over time and location.[1]



Discussion

There are two fundamentally important aspects of water quality – health and taste. California's large cities are fortunate that professional water agency staff regularly test and treat supplies, ensuring that their water is safe to drink.[2]

Water delivered in Marin, the East Bay and San Francisco is not only safe, but tastes good due to its modest mineral content. Water supplies in the East Bay and San Francisco primarily originate in the Sierra Nevada and are augmented by local rainfall and small amounts of groundwater.

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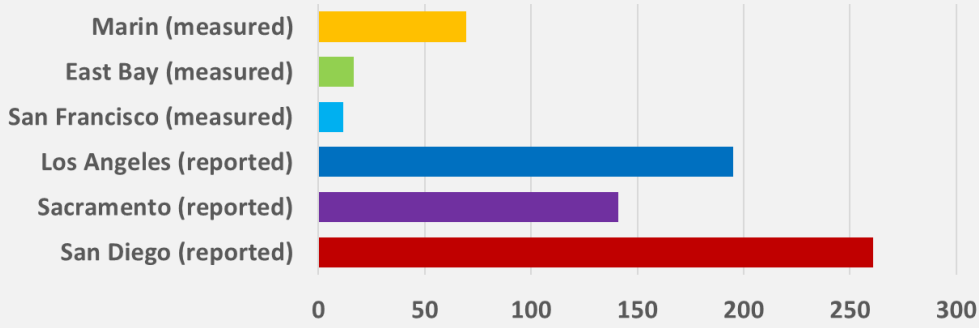
[1] On average, San Francisco derives 85% of its supply from the Tuolumne River. In recent years, however, the City has relied on local supplies and reservoirs in winter months so staff can do maintenance on the Mountain Tunnel – something customers rarely notice.

[2] Water in many small communities in California is not in fact safe to drink. See the **Community Water Center** for more information.

Water supplies in Marin come from local rainfall and groundwater, some of which is imported from Sonoma County.

Some water experts have indicated they prefer San Francisco's water for its "pure" taste. Others prefer water with a slight mineral taste (mostly calcium and magnesium), suggesting that San Francisco's water may be too neutral for their palate. Too much mineral content, as is the case with much of southern California's water, is generally disfavored. Figure 3, below, compares the mineral content of the samples used in the taste tests with values reported in water supplies for San Diego, Los Angeles and Sacramento.

Figure 3: Water Supply Mineral Content Comparison
(milligrams of calcium and magnesium per liter)



Supplies from Marin, the East Bay and San Francisco were analyzed by Tap Score (see Appendices 3, 4 & 5). Average values for Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Diego were reported online.

Mineral content varies at all water agencies but the values shown above are consistent with the agencies' water sources. San Francisco and East Bay supplies, principally derived from Sierra Nevada rivers and conveyed to the Bay Area via pipelines and tunnels, have the lowest mineral content. Marin water is a mix of local rain and groundwater. Sacramento gets most of its water from the Sacramento and American Rivers after they flow through the Central Valley. Los Angeles and San Diego receive water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Bay-Delta and Colorado River as well as local supplies.

Conclusion

When Hetch Hetchy Valley is restored, San Francisco will still rely principally on the Tuolumne River for the majority of its supply. Water will be stored in and diverted from Cherry, Eleanor and/or Don Pedro Reservoirs – with mineral content perhaps similar to EBMUD's Pardee Reservoir. *Customers may like their water even better!*

Restore Hetch Hetchy believes the reputation of 'Hetch Hetchy' water is overstated. We welcome opportunities to collaborate with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission or other interested parties on future independent testing.