

CASA Conference Report – August 2026

I attended the August CASA conference in Napa. CASA is a smaller conference than CSDA, but in some ways that makes it particularly useful for us. CSDA represents the full range of California special districts—water and wastewater, fire, hospitals, vector control, veterans halls, and many others. CASA is focused specifically on wastewater. As a result, the presentations and conversations tend to be much more directly related to the issues we are dealing with at MSD.

A recurring theme was the challenge of maintaining and replacing aging infrastructure. Treatment plants, collection systems, pumps, pipelines, electrical systems, and other major assets are expensive to repair and even more expensive to replace. Construction costs continue to increase, regulatory requirements continue to change, and agencies have to make long-term decisions with limited resources.

That is obviously relevant to MSD. We are dealing with several major issues at the same time: stabilizing an aging treatment plant, deciding where and how wastewater should be treated in the future, implementing the Collection System Master Plan, and determining how to finance the work that needs to be done.

The conference reinforced something we are already seeing at MSD: these are not separate issues. The treatment plant, collection system, capital improvement program, financing, recycled water, and our long-term treatment decision all affect one another. We need to look at them together and make sure the decisions we make today fit into a larger plan.

Funding was also an important topic. There are state and federal programs that can help agencies finance major infrastructure projects, but those opportunities do not do much good if an agency does not have projects sufficiently developed to pursue them. That means identifying projects early, establishing priorities, completing enough engineering and planning to understand what is needed, and being ready when funding opportunities become available.

There was also significant discussion about the changing role of wastewater agencies. Wastewater treatment is increasingly connected to recycled water, energy use, resource recovery, resilience, and broader water planning. Not every idea discussed at a statewide conference will make sense for Montecito, but we should understand the available options before making infrastructure decisions that may affect the District for the next 30 or 40 years.

For me, one of the more important takeaways was the relationship between planning and action. Good decisions require good information. We should understand the condition of our infrastructure, evaluate alternatives, understand costs, and consider the long-term consequences before committing ratepayer money.

But the purpose of doing that work is to make decisions.

At some point, continuing to study an issue can become a substitute for acting on it. That is particularly important when dealing with aging infrastructure, because delaying needed work does not usually make the problem cheaper or easier to solve.

I also found the conversations with representatives from other agencies useful. Many districts are facing the same basic problems we are facing, and there is value in understanding what they have done, what has worked, what has not worked, and how their boards have approached difficult capital and financial decisions. Because CASA is focused on wastewater, those conversations tend to be particularly relevant to the decisions we are making at MSD.

Overall, the conference reinforced the importance of having a clear long-term plan and then carrying it out. For MSD, that means understanding the condition of our system, identifying the work that needs to be done, setting priorities, deciding how we are going to pay for it, and then moving the projects forward.

That is ultimately the Board's responsibility.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rock Rockenbach". The signature is stylized with a large, looping initial "R" and a trailing flourish.

Rock Rockenbach