

Kelley Geyer, Byron-Bethany Irrigation District



BBID staff work on the Canal 120 project.

Byron-Bethany Irrigation District (BBID) is a multicounty special district serving parts of Alameda, Contra Costa, and San Joaquin Counties, east of the San Francisco Bay Area. Its service area covers 47 square miles and 30,000 acres. The district serves 160 agricultural customers and more than 20,000 residents of the Mountain House community. In this interview, BBID Assistant General Manager Kelley Geyer tells Irrigation Leader about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the district's operations and services.

Irrigation Leader: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your operations?

Kelley Geyer: We are not delivering the typical amount of water. To date, we have delivered about 50 percent less, as our farmers have not yet planted all the acreage that they would otherwise

have planted. Our farmers are dealing with contract reductions with their buyers that have been caused by the pandemic and are also waiting for the return of many seasonal farm workers.

Irrigation Leader: How are you keeping your customers and employees safe?

Kelley Geyer: With regard to our customers, we have been making customer appointments. Upon entering our facility, each person uses the hand sanitizer at the reception area; sign-in pens are also sanitized after each use. During deliveries to our facility by UPS, FedEx, the U.S. Postal Service, and others, everyone wears masks, as has been mandated in Contra Costa County. To gain access to the facility, all visitors must stop in the vestibule area and use an intercom system. This system was not used previously, and it initially upset a few delivery companies, though they have adjusted.



BBID provides water to both agricultural and residential customers.

The district has also implemented stricter cleanliness measures with its staff. Each operations and maintenance employee must wash their arms from the shirt sleeves down, their hands, and their faces upon entering our facilities. Administrative staff use disposable gloves to handle packages, money, and the daily mail. All frequently used surfaces are cleaned daily, prior to departure. All staff have been supplied with multiple types of face masks, hand sanitizer, and boxes of tissue to use on their vehicles and equipment. We also purchased face wipes and eyelid cleanser for staff, which assisted in minimizing their allergies—we are located amid thousands of acres of almonds and cherries. As much as possible, our staff are working in teams of no more than two, which we thought would help us with contact tracing in the event of an infection.


Irrigation Leader: What is the most innovative thing you have done to maintain your workflow?

Kelley Geyer: We are doing check-ins with our customers via text and phone calls. We already have a great relationship with them, but the increased communications give us the opportunity to share a meme or a joke for a good laugh. It's not particularly innovative, but it's effective. We started to conduct daily staff debriefings, which are rather informal—we share a snack, catch up on work projects, and talk about the crazy virus. In our group, we have a ton of comedians; once they start, it rolls, and we all laugh a lot and let off some of our stress.

Irrigation Leader: Do you expect any of the changes you have made to be retained after the pandemic is over?

Kelley Geyer: The sanitizing and washing will continue. The increased communication with customers and the practice of making appointments with our customers will most likely continue as well. Customers really like that, because we are 15 miles out of town, and if we make an appointment, we are expecting them and are able to prepare the business they want to take care of. The debriefings with staff have also been beneficial.

Irrigation Leader: What advice do you have for other districts?

Kelley Geyer: Good communication with staff is essential. It has increased our staff's confidence that we are all in this together. More importantly, at the end of a hard day of work, laughter removes tension, improves energy, and helps us maintain a positive and measured outlook. Our employees go home happy and ready to come back to work their next shifts. 



Kelley Geyer is the assistant general manager of Byron-Bethany Irrigation District in Byron, California. For more about BBID, visit bbid.org.