

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Keeping the dust down in California's Owens Valley

A civil engineer battles Los Angeles over its air pollution legacy.

Jane Braxton Little March 2, 2015 From the [print edition](#)



Downdrafts kick up dust over Owens Lake.
Brian Russell/GBUAPCD

Don't call Ted Schade a hero — definitely not an environmental one. Even though he's largely responsible for the cleanup of cancer-causing dust from Southern California's Owens Lake, something he accomplished by waging a decades-long David vs. Goliath battle against the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power — Schade will tell you: He is not a hero.

The director of the Great Basin Unified Air Pollution Control District, a California agency, Schade views his legacy with an engineer's practical logic. "I had a lawbreaker. I'm a law enforcement officer," he says, rummaging in a desk drawer for the badge he confesses he has seldom worn.

A lean, mild-mannered man with thinning gray hair, Schade, 57, seems more like Mr. Rogers' sidekick than an environmental warrior. He is polite and genteel, the product of a Catholic education. But the strength that helped him successfully challenge one of the nation's most powerful municipal departments sparkles in his eyes: steely blue, penetrating and amused. "I like the fight," he says.

Schade (pronounced "shady") works from Suite 9, his office under the red-tiled roof of a former Bishop motel that serves as headquarters for the tiny air pollution district. On the wall is a mid-1800s map of the Owens Lake Mining District and a small pencil drawing of a snowy plover, the lake's iconic bird. The miniature Japanese-inspired water fountain Schade built, complete with tiny bamboo spout, burbles.

"I'm a water guy, and this is the desert," he explains with a shrug and quick smile.

For much of the last 24 years, he has haunted the dusty shores and crusty dry bottom of Owens Lake, monitoring air pollution. Schade loved the area from childhood visits, and, years later, on a whim, left a water-engineer job in San Diego County at twice the salary to join the air district. When he first heard of fugitive dust, he thought it sounded like something escaped prisoners left in their wake. But he soon learned that the ambient particles swirling over the basin were a major health hazard — and a violation of the federal Clean Air Act. Owens Lake is the largest single source of tiny particulate matter in the United States.

The 110-square-mile lakebed has been dry since 1926, 13 years after Los Angeles officials opened an aqueduct that diverted water 200 miles away to the young metropolis. The audacious water grab, memorialized in the 1974 movie *Chinatown*, turned the lake into a ghostly white alkali void. Winds sweeping down the Sierra Nevada kicked up a toxic brew of arsenic and other carcinogens, carrying it up to 50 miles and threatening the 40,000 residents of the Owens Valley region with asthma and emphysema — even heart attacks.

"You don't want to breathe this stuff," says Schade. "It can kill you."



Ted Schade
Jane Braxton Little

He made it his mission to improve air quality, experimenting with dust-abatement techniques that required the least amount of water: shallow flooding, gravel, saltgrass. He meticulously documented airborne particulates. And he kept poking around the lakebed and finding more pollution. By 1997, he was prepared to order Los Angeles to implement dust controls under federal clean air regulations.

“And then the fun began,” says Schade. L.A. balked; Schade persisted. L.A. sued. Courts backed the district. L.A. attacked. Schade increased monitoring. By 2013, the city was devoting 25 billion gallons of water annually and had spent more than \$1.3 billion on dust abatement. That reduced dust by 90 percent — but it wasn’t enough.

Throughout the struggle, Schade remained committed to a fundamental principle: “Los Angeles has caused a problem. It has to clean up after itself.” He recounts the ensuing barrage of personal insults with obvious relish: empire builder, out-of-control regulator, zealot. “If they stopped calling me names, I’d know I was not doing my job.”

It did get ugly, says Pete Pumphrey, a retired attorney and president of Eastern Sierra Audubon. After each setback, Schade regrouped and returned to the battlefield. “He’s one of those people able to see the outcome and just keep working toward that vision.”

During Schade’s 24 years, three months and 20 days with the air district, Los Angeles went through five different Department of Water and Power managers. Through it all, Schade stuck to his tactic of “making agreeing agreeable because the alternative is so bad.”

It finally worked. When Eric Garcetti became mayor of Los Angeles in 2013, he brought in new managers who were interested in solutions, not unending combat. “They knew a lousy legal strategy when they saw one,” Schade says. Meanwhile, Schade and the air district had finalized tests of a new waterless dust-abatement method. Late last year, the city agreed to control the dust on up to 53.4 square miles of lakebed, using enormous bulldozers to dig deep furrows that capture and retain the loose dust. The agreement promises clean air for Owens Valley and allows Los Angeles to save 3 billion gallons of water annually — a classic win-win.

In a press release touting the settlement, Mayor Garcetti described Schade as “a truly great environmentalist.” Of all the names he has been called over the years, this is the most surprising one and, considering the many past insults, it’s from the office Schade least expected. “It’s ironic,” he says, with a rare full-on grin. “I guess I finally got through.”

Ted Schade

Vocation: Civil engineer, on his Dec. 31 retirement: “My job here is done.”

Hometown: Orange County, California

Botanical prowess: Grows 150 varieties of organic roses

Literary prowess: Wrote *Owens Water Journal*, a collection of haiku

Artistic passion: Building furniture, clocks and office fixtures. “Woodworking is the most useful art.”

His ride: Yamaha 650.

He says: “We need the rabble-rousers, the alternative solution.”