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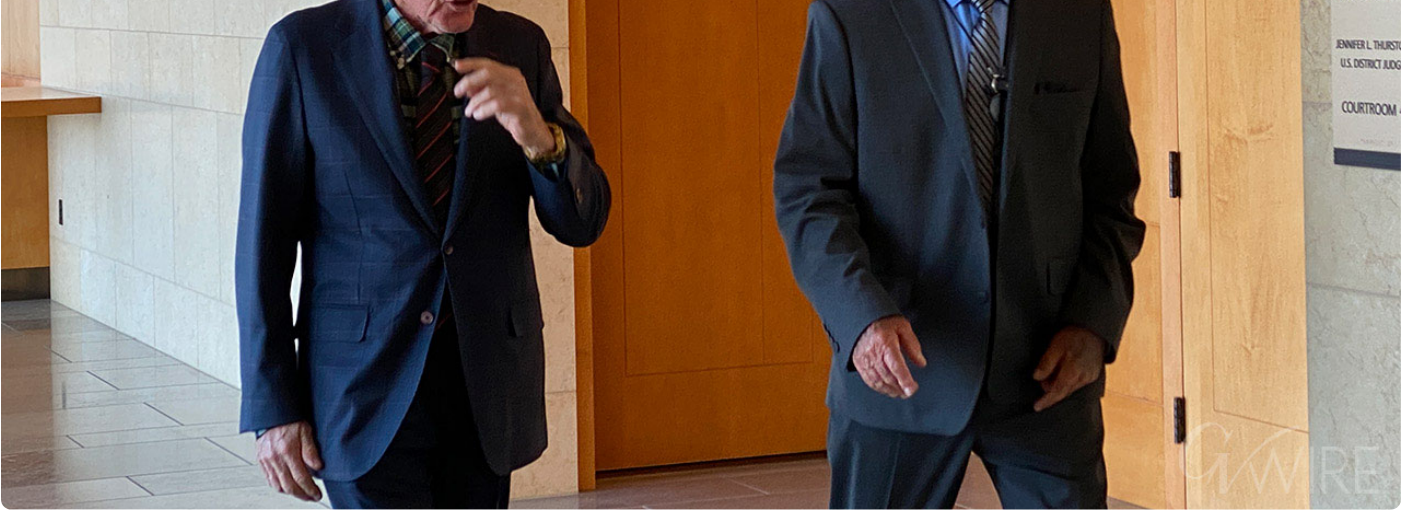
No Prison Time for Fresno County Water Thief Who Took Plea Deal



By **David Taub**, Senior Reporter

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Former public water manager Dennis Falaschi (right), seen with attorney Oliver Wanger, Monday, Sept. 30, 2024, won't serve prison time for stealing as much as \$3.5 million worth of water. (GV Wire/David Taub)

HIGHLIGHTS

- Dennis Falaschi, 78, will not serve prison time, he learned in federal court Monday.
- Falaschi, the former general manager of the Panoche Water District, pleaded guilty to water theft.
- Judge Jennifer Thurston sentenced him to five years' probation and six months' home detention. He also was fined \$10,000.

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A water manager of a public agency, who pleaded guilty to stealing as much as \$3.5 m. 



\$3.5 million of water from the Delta-Mendota Canal and illegally selling it on the market.

Attorney Marc Days, representing Falaschi, successfully argued against prison time during a one-hour sentencing hearing. He said that Falaschi had survived a stroke and has diabetes. Days also questioned whether Falaschi could survive a prison sentence.

“Who knows how much longer he has?” Days said.

In 2022, the government charged Falaschi with one count of conspiracy, one count of theft of government property, and three counts of filing a false tax return. He changed his plea to guilty in May.

Prosecutors Wanted One Year

Prosecutors sought a sentence of 12 months and a day. The federal probation department recommended six months.

Thurston at times seemed to waffle about her decision. She cut off Days at one point, when the attorney argued that federal sentencing guidelines did not reflect the actual amount of water stolen.

“I’m concerned about deterrence,” Thurston said from the bench. She also quoted the line that “whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting.”

Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Barton argued the significance of the water loss.

“He should go to prison and serve a meaningful sentence,” Barton told the judge. “That needs to be punished ... to send a message .. that this will not be tolerated.”

Initially accused of stealing \$25 million worth of water for personal benefit, the plea agreement revised the amount of stolen water to between \$1.5 and \$3.5 million for the benefit of the district.





Days said that Falaschi wanted to protect farmland and prevent toxic discharge into the San Joaquin River, by blending the stolen federal water with other sources and delivering it to farmers.

Falaschi briefly spoke to the court.

"I should have found a better way to deal with a toxic problem, to save things from being destroyed," Falaschi said.

He apologized to the court, but said he had to do something because the federal government was not paying attention to water issues.

Thurston Justifies Decision

Thurston — a President Joseph Biden appointment confirmed in 2021 — told Falaschi what he did was wrong.

"I don't think what you did is justified. What you don't do is steal," Thurston said.

But, she also said that it is unlikely Falaschi will re-offend.

"Does he have to risk his life over it?" Thurston said.

Days said that Falaschi cares for ailing family members, including his wife and children.

Neither Falaschi, nor his attorneys, Days and former federal judge Oliver Wanger, commented after the hearing.

Barton declined to comment on the sentence, as did U.S. Attorney Phillip A. Talbert.





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David Taub, Senior Reporter

Curiosity drives David Taub. The award-winning journalist might be shy, but feels mighty with a recorder in his hand. He doesn't see it his job to "hold public officials accountable," but does see it to provide readers (and voters) the information needed to make intelligent choices. Taub has been honored with several writing awards from the California News Publishers Association. He's just happy to have his stories read. Joining GV Wire in 2016, Taub covers politics, government and elections, mainly in the Fresno/Clovis area. He also writes columns about local eateries (Appetite for Fresno), pro wrestling (Off the Bottom Rope), and media (Media Man). Prior to joining the online news source, Taub worked as a radio producer for KMJ and PowerTalk 96.7 in Fresno. He also worked as an assignment editor for KCOY-TV in Santa Maria, California, and KSEE-TV in Fresno. He has also worked behind the scenes for several sports broadcasts, including the NCAA basketball tournament, and the Super Bowl. When not spending time with his family, Taub loves to officially score Fresno Grizzlies games. Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, Taub is a die-hard Giants and 49ers fan. He graduated from the University of Michigan with dual degrees in communications and political science. Go Blue! You can contact David at 559-492-4037 or at [Send an Email](#)

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