

County Pushes New Water Plan

JAKE HENSHAW

CALIFORNIAN CAPITOL BUREAU

Proposal calls for \$20 million dam

SACRAMENTO - Monterey County water officials Wednesday brought their latest plan to combat saltwater intrusion to the state Water Resources Control Board. The \$20 million plan calls for use of an inflatable rubber dam on the northern Salinas River and modifications to Nacimiento and San Antonio reservoirs to substitute more surface water for groundwater between Castroville and Salinas.

The plan is a significant departure from the proposal previously presented to the state board, a \$125 million to \$400 million pipeline plan that failed to garner community support. But Monterey County water officials said the less expensive new plan would be just as effective in ending the creep of seawater into groundwater supplies used by cities and farmers.

"If we get it done, this will stop seawater intrusion in its tracks," said Stephen Collins, chairman of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency. Right now, seawater has intruded as much as six miles inland in aquifers at a depth of 180 feet and three miles into the 400-foot-deep aquifer, the officials said. The local water agency plan would combat this saltwater intrusion by revising operation of lakes Nacimiento and San Antonio to increase flexibility in releasing water to flow down the Salinas River. Then the proposed rubber dam will pool the water for distribution to users in the northern part of the county so they can reduce groundwater pumping.

Monterey County Water Resources Agency General Manager Curtis Weeks said the plan calls for sending an additional 9,000 to 10,000 acre-feet annually on average from the reservoirs to the northern part of the county. But Weeks acknowledged that this plan could squeeze water supplies in the reservoirs in dry years, a situation that has drawn some local criticism for the plan.

No one spoke against the plan Wednesday, and the only question came from chairman Arthur Baggett Jr., when Weeks said his agency is working with the National Marine Fisheries Service on the environmental review of the new plan. "Is (the marine service) satisfied?" Baggett asked. "I don't know if I'll go that far," Weeks said. He said the agency is on schedule to prepare an environmental assessment of the project for review by the marine service and other federal agencies.

Public comment on the environmental plan ended Aug. 28, and the local agency now will work to complete the final report by the end of the year.

When it comes to funding for the project, he and Collins said the agency will be looking for federal and state funds. At a minimum, local water users will be called on to cover the estimated \$400,000 a year in operating costs. Collins said the state already has provided his agency with \$800,000 to prepare a local plan to combat saltwater intrusion.

What's at stake

The state for years has been urging the Monterey County Water Resources Agency to solve the saltwater intrusion problem. If the county agency fails, the state board is expected to step in and take steps to address the problem.