

Ag Cheers Water Plan

BRIAN GAYLORD, STAFF

Supervisors give blessing to Salinas Valley water project

'Rubber dam' would enable farmers to irrigate without drawing table down. The Salinas Valley agricultural community got a show of support this week when the Monterey County Board of Supervisors agreed Tuesday to endorse the \$25 million Salinas Valley Water Project. The project's purpose is to keep seawater out of the underground water supplies that serve virtually all of the valley. It will allow Monterey County to store more water in Lake Nacimiento, which it operates.

In north Monterey County, a 'rubber dam' would be built to capture water to help farmers in the Castroville area irrigate their crops without pulling water from the underground aquifers. John Inman, a Salinas-based engineer and consultant who specializes in agriculture, said the project is an important step in combating an overdraft problem, where more water is pumped out than is getting recharged into the groundwater basin. State law prohibits degrading a groundwater basin. The state Water Resources Control Board can regulate a basin if it isn't regulated on a local level, but that's not a welcome prospect for the ag community, Inman said.

"You get a meter on the well," he said. "Once you've got it, you're stuck with it." Nearby, the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency charges water users per acre-foot as a means of paying for projects that will solve their overdraft. The PVWMA handles it, not the state, Inman said. Before a mail ballot on the Salinas Valley Water Project is held, Inman said, he expects to see county ag interests rally strongly behind it. "In official terminology, based on rainfall, we are a desert," he said.

Curtis Weeks, Monterey County Water Resources Agency manager, said that the ag community is aware that maintaining local control is important. Weeks said the Castroville Seawater Intrusion Project, begun in 1998 in Castroville and completed a few years ago, highlighted the fact that the state needs reservoirs to recharge groundwater. "Ag is dependent upon that lifeblood (water)," Weeks said. He added that while the fee formula needs to be worked out, he believes the Salinas Valley Water Project can be paid for in a fair and equitable way, with proportion assessments based on benefits recovered.

Consequently, north county residents likely would face considerably higher fees than their counterparts in the south. Bob Antle, co-chairman of independent produce grower and distributor Tanimura & Antle, said he expects voters to give their consent to the project. "There's such broad support for this," Antle said. "The benefits are so huge." He said it requires educating voters and framing the plan properly so that they can understand it. He said a reasonable start date for construction of the project is 2004. "I think we've finally gotten a solution to a 50-year-old problem," Antle said.

Nacimiento is used to irrigate Salinas Valley crops, but the reservoir is in San Luis Obispo County. Lake Nacimiento and nearby reservoir Lake San Antonio, both operated by Monterey County, were built to provide water and flood protection for the Salinas Valley. The project calls for changes to the Lake Nacimiento spillway and operating changes at both lakes to release more water into the valley during the summer to recharge underground water tables.

San Luis Obispo County residents whose homes and businesses would be hurt by higher-volume water releases from Lakes Nacimiento and San Antonio are voicing opposition to the project. But Inman said the reservoirs were built for the purpose of meeting the Salinas Valley water needs. "I hate to pound on the locals from San Luis Obispo County," he said, "but nothing ever said those folks had guaranteed water."

What's next ?

A 19-member advisory group is working on a property fee structure to finance the proposed Salinas Valley Water Project. They will have a final cost allocation meeting in June and make a recommendation to the Monterey County Water Resources Agency board of directors. The final fee plan will be presented to the Board of Supervisors likely by the end of August. If approved, a ballot will then be sent out to Salinas Valley property owners in a mail election.