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## **85 Percent of Ballots Approve It**

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### **Assessments will fight seawater intrusion in Salinas Valley**

Salinas Valley property owners overwhelmingly favor a new water project intended to check the spread of seawater in the valley's vital underground water supplies. Results of a mail-ballot election announced Tuesday showed property owners throughout the valley are willing to pay assessments for the \$18.8 million Salinas Valley Water Project. The project, scheduled to start delivering water from the Salinas River in 2005 to Castroville-area farms, won approval on 85 percent of the assessment-weighted ballots. Monterey County supervisors and officials from the county Water Resources Agency said the lopsided election results stemmed from years of hard work and compromises on water issues.

"It really does show the county can come together and build some important facilities for our future," water agency manager Curtis Weeks said. Said Supervisor Lou Calcagno, "We have more harmony today on water issues ... in the Salinas Valley than we've ever had."

### **\$4 to \$25 an acre**

The election approves annual assessments ranging from \$4 to \$25 an acre to pay for three things: a seasonal dam on the Salinas River near Marina enlarging the dam spillway at Lake Nacimiento and the ongoing groundwater-recharge operations of Lakes Nacimiento and San Antonio. The assessments will generate about \$3.8 million a year. Results of the 45-day election were weighted according to the proposed assessment on each piece of property. Each assessment dollar represented one vote. The final count stood at \$2.15 million in yes votes and about \$396,000 in no votes. The turnout represented 64 percent of total assessments.

"That was just fabulous," water agency board chairman Stephen Collins said of the election participation. The rubber diversion dam will supply about 9,700 acre-feet of river water a year for use on Castroville-area fields. The area already uses recycled wastewater to reduce pumping from salt-plagued well fields. Weeks said the project should reverse the 50-year creep of saltwater into water tables in the northern Salinas Valley. Ballots were mailed to about 56,000 property owners in early February. The final tally showed the project also won in a raw ballot count by an 11,251-to-4,797 margin. "We do have a project that will solve our saltwater intrusion problem," said Nancy Isakson, spokeswoman for project supporters.

### **Lindley: 'Be careful'**

But Supervisor Butch Lindley said the county will continue to face water issues, and he cautioned water agency officials "to be careful with this mandate you've received." Salinas Valley property owners will see the new assessments on property tax bills coming in November. The new "Zone 2C" charges will replace current "Zones 2-2A" charges on property tax bills. Supervisor Edith Johnsen said the election capped nearly two decades of effort to address water problems in the Salinas Valley. The new project dovetails with the water-recycling project that began providing irrigation water to 12,000 acres near Castroville in 1998, she said. "Everybody is to be congratulated for their patience and their endurance," Johnsen said. Salinas-area grower Chris Bunn said, "It's nice to see something accomplished in this valley." Support for the project came from a broad array of agricultural and business groups, and local government agencies. Critics said the project would provide no benefit to some north county properties and would subsidize agricultural operations at the expense of urban water users.