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Suits Delay Water Project

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Other hurdles include environmental issues, permits. Funding source still to be determined. Curtis Weeks can see himself pushing a button on April 1, 2006, to raise a new rubber dam across the lower reach of the Salinas River near Marina. The seasonal dam, which will provide water to be pumped to Castroville-area farm fields, is one of two pieces of the \$18.8 million Salinas Valley Water Project.

Before Weeks' vision of the seasonal dam - and the project's other half, a modified dam spillway at Lake Nacimiento - can come to pass, the Monterey County Water Resources Agency faces a number of hurdles. Weeks is general manager of the agency. The project, which officials say will eliminate groundwater pumping, which causes saltwater intrusion in the lower Salinas Valley, vaulted its biggest hurdle in April. That's when valley property owners, by an overwhelming margin, approved annual property assessments to pay for the project.

"We need to show we can get the job done as soon as possible," Weeks said, referring to the mandate and momentum arising from the assessment election. "We need to have this project moving forward." During the next two years, the water agency must put to rest matters of fish, financing and law to clear the way for the water project. Here's a rundown on remaining tasks:

*Permits: The project needs state and federal permits dependent on how it would affect the migration of endangered steelhead up the Salinas River to spawning grounds on the Arroyo Seco River. Federal wildlife officials want more scientific information about the river's biological history. Though Weeks is confident the agency will navigate the complex process - with the help of state, federal and local elected officials - he said securing the federal permits are the project's "most critical path."

*Money: The agency is looking at several ways to finance the project: state grants, federal money, state loans or municipal bonds. Meanwhile, the first money to pay off the project is beginning to trickle in with property tax bills due Dec. 10. The assessments will generate about \$1.25 million a year. But several property owners on the east side of the Salinas Valley near Gonzales filed a lawsuit in October challenging the assessments, contending they are being overcharged for benefits they will get from the project. Weeks said he's confident the assessments, which also have upset some Prunedale area property owners, will be upheld. "We did our best to identify the benefits and the costs," he said. "I think it's going to hold up."

*Lawsuits: The agency still faces lawsuits from a resort business owner and homeowners at Lakes Nacimiento and San Antonio over summer releases of water from the two reservoirs. The project's environmental impact report has been upheld in the homeowners' lawsuit, but contract and damage issues remain to be resolved, Weeks said. The court cases shouldn't prevent the agency from moving ahead, he said. "I'm more concerned about the permits than the legal issues," he said. "Every water agency has legal issues. They are part of doing business."

What's next?

Monterey County Water Resources Agency officials expect to hire a designer in January for the inflatable, rubber-dam portion of the Salinas Valley Water Project.