

# County officials suspect water figures are

By Scott Swanson  
Staff Writer

**SAN LUIS OBISPO** — County officials say the water cost estimates may be too optimistic in the final environmental impact report for the state water project last week.

The EIR estimates that the cost of state water for local users will range from \$325 to \$420 per acre-foot, plus another \$110 per acre-foot for treatment.

But Special Projects Engineer Van Laurn said that those estimates don't account for certain variables that could boost those costs.

Laurn said one problem is that the EIR addresses costs in 1989 dollars. Most costs listed in the final report

have not changed since the draft EIR was released on June 13, 1990.

Also, the EIR did not figure in cost increases that Laurn says will occur when various State Water Project facilities are completed in the San Joaquin Valley and the Sacramento River Delta.

Laurn figures that state water will cost \$780 to \$1,000 per-acre foot in San Luis Obispo and the Five Cities area — about double what the EIR estimates.

An acre-foot is 325,851 gallons of water, the amount two average families of three would use in one year or enough water to stand one foot deep on an acre of land.

Laurn said that he has calculated the costs to consumers for state water in 1995 dollars, which will be about the mid-point of the pipeline construction.

By contrast, he estimated water from Nacimiento Lake would cost about \$770 per acre-foot in 1995.

And the above costs are the best case scenario for the Coastal Branch, he noted.

If San Luis Obispo County water purveyors only bought in for 6,000 acre-feet instead of the 20,000 to which they are entitled, the costs for state water increase to \$980 to \$1,150 per acre-foot, he explained.

Laurn predicted that several purveyors in the Camp San Luis area north of San Luis Obispo including the California Men's Colony and Cuesta College, will com-

mit to buying state water.

In addition, he figures that Pismo Beach, Avila Beach and possibly Port San Luis, Oceano, Nipomo Community Services District and Cal Cities Water on the Nipomo Mesa will buy in.

The total entitlement for those communities is about 6,000 acre-foot, he said.

Another problem with the EIR figures is that there is no guarantee they won't go up after the pipeline is operating, he reported.

"The figures in the state EIR are by no means static figures," Laurn said. "As more facilities are built, those figures are subject to change. We know from history that they never go down."

On the other hand, Laurn said Nacimiento water costs would stay pretty much at one level, as would desalination — as long as energy rates for the latter stayed static.

"With the state you have the en-

tire state administration and operations," Laurn said. "If they tap into the peripheral canal, we automatically get the increase in costs."

The EIR has taken 3½ years to produce and cost \$6 million. Officials have estimated that construction of the 87-mile Coastal Branch pipeline through San Luis Obispo County will take about 3½ years, once the communities in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties have decided whether they want state water.

Voters in various Santa Barbara County communities will decide the issue there on June 4. The Santa Maria City Council has already decided it wants state water.

Officials have stated that San Luis Obispo County water purveyors should decide by the end of the year whether or not they want state water.

San Luis Obispo County has paid for its state water entitlement since

1964. It currently pays about \$1.1 million per year and will pay \$16 million more through 2035 for its share of the costs of constructing the pipeline, according to Laurn.

Estimated construction costs for the Coastal Branch range from \$239.3 million to \$299 million, depending on how long the pipeline needs to be.

County Engineer Clint Milne said that estimate may be fairly accurate.

He said that Solano and Napa counties compared the actual costs to the state's estimated costs for a pipeline built from the Sacramento River Delta to their counties in the mid-1980s. The counties found that the actual costs were only about 5 percent above the estimates.

## Pismo publishes leisure guide

**PISMO BEACH** — The Recreation Division has published the Summer Leisure Guide, a schedule of programs, classes, and trips.

Copies are available at Pismo Beach City Hall, 11000 Bello St., at county libraries in Arroyo Grande and Shell Beach at Long and Pissori Pharmacia, 711 Holliver St., and at Pismo Tree Value Hardware, 930 Price St., Pismo Beach.

For more information or to have a Leisure Guide mailed, people can call Pismo Beach Recreation at 773-4658.

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Milne said that engineers routinely include contingencies of between 10 to 25 percent to account for unexpected costs and problems.

"The fact that they had that project finished and then evaluated it and the fact that the same people who evaluated that one are evaluating this one gives this (estimate) credibility," Milne said.

He said that costs can be "distorted immensely" by such things as a surge in energy prices or double-digit inflation like in the early 1980s. On the other hand, a recession or depression would force costs down.

"Really, the cost is how hard it is to pay," Milne said. "It's all relative."

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