

State water contracts must wait for environment

By Scott Swanson
Staff Writer

SAN LUIS OBISPO — Faced with protests from State Water Project opponents, county supervisors on Tuesday postponed submitting draft agreements for state water to prospective project subscribers.

After a two-hour hearing on the item, which was pulled off the consent agenda by 3rd District Supervisor Evelyn Delany, supervisors voted 3-2 not to approve the draft contracts or send them to prospective participants until an environmental impact report for local spur lines is completed.

Fourth District Supervisor Ruth Brackett and 1st District Supervisor Harry Ovitt dissented in the vote.

Ovitt warned that waiting until the EIR is completed will delay the

decision on the draft contracts until March or April.

The final EIR for the local delivery spurs is not expected to be ready for public scrutiny until the end of January, county Environmental Coordinator Ellen Carroll said.

Seventeen members of the public testified on the issue, 15 opposing approval of the draft contracts.

Opponents complained that the item deserved a full public hearing and that it shouldn't have been on the consent agenda in the first place.

Sally Craig of Atascadero said that she had a "definite feeling of being railroaded" by the county.

"There should be a public hearing on any step of the State Water Project," Craig said.

County Engineer Clint Milne told the board that his purpose in putting the item on the agenda was simply to allow water purveyors to have plenty of time to look at the draft contract.

"The intent of the contract is to make sure everybody is treated

equally," Milne said. "No contracts will be signed until after the EIR is completed."

Another issue Tuesday was when the deadline for the county's decision on whether it will participate in the Coastal Branch of the State Water Project would be.

Milne said that the state Department of Water Resources has, on its own initiative, set the deadline for June 3.

He said the state has the authority to do so, though either San Luis Obispo County or Santa Barbara County could set the clock rolling by notifying the state of its intention to participate. The deadline would have been six months from that the date of that notification, but neither county has done so.

Board Chairman David Blakely asked why the draft contracts were not submitted to the Water Resources Advisory Committee for review.

Milne said that to do so would have taken too long.

The water advisory committee, made up of representatives of larger water purveyors in the county and other interested citizens, meets monthly. The committee has been working since July to try to agree on a recommendation regarding state water in general, but has been unable to do so.

"We don't have that much time," Milne said. "Six months is a blink of an eye in planning controversial projects. That's why I want to proceed as expeditiously as possible."

Some board members disagreed with 2nd District Supervisor Bud Laurent's assertion that the contracts should be subjected to a full public hearing.

Ovitt said that local jurisdictions will be able to conduct their own public hearings when they consider the final water agreements.

Both he and Brackett supported sending the contracts out for review immediately.

But Blakely and Delany said that the contracts should wait until the

local EIR is completed.

Delany said she wanted a public hearing on the issue and that the contracts should be revised based on information from the local EIR.

Members of the public also complained that the contracts should be accompanied by or include more information, such as the actual costs per acre-foot of state water based on various delivery capabilities and the chances of purveyors getting their full entitlements.

Water purveyors who contract for state water must pay for their entitlement and if they don't get their full entitlements, the cost of the water goes up per acre-foot.

Don Smith of San Luis Obispo said that if the state can only deliver 20 percent of local entitlements, the cost of state water would quadruple.

"We don't know how long this drought is going to last," Smith said.

Charles Gulyash complained that residents will have to pay the price if the costs of state water go up because the state cannot deliver the



Contracts must wait for environmental review

the draft contracts until April.

EIR for the local delivery not expected to be ready until the end of the county Environmental Resources Board meeting, Ellen Carroll said.

Members of the public opposing the issue, 15 opposing the draft contracts.

Some complained that the need for a full public hearing shouldn't have been on the agenda in the first place.

John Sig of Atascadero said he has a "definite feeling of being excluded" by the county.

There should be a public hearing on the State Water Project, he said.

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"We don't know how long this drought is going to last," Smith said.

Charles Gulyash complained that residents will have to pay the price if the costs of state water go up because the state cannot deliver the

entitlement contracted for by local agencies.

"It sounds like a pretty silly business deal," he said. "The fact is, we water users are going to have to pay that money. It puts us in a position with a noose around our neck. That's not a good position to be in if you don't have a say in the matter."

Gulyash also complained that county planning documents appear to assume that state water will be available for population increases even though the state Groundwater Resources Board has banned future annexation for the Nipomo Community Services District.

One speaker in favor of state water was Al Switzer of Los Osos.

Switzer said that most local agencies have "competent councils and competent attorneys" and don't need protection from the county.

He urged the board to go ahead and send the draft contracts.

"You shouldn't wait until the last minute," said Switzer. "Move ahead today."