

San Luis Obispo board set to vote on state water

By Teresa Mariani
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State water foes and fans will battle it out again Wednesday — this time in San Luis Obispo County.

Most of the issues dealt with in this Wednesday's special meeting before San Luis Obispo County supervisors will be familiar to Santa Barbara County residents: Is state water reliable? Will it result in a bumper crop of houses sprouting everywhere? Will the cost skyrocket and make the simple act of taking a bath unaffordable?

But this time the outcome may be different. Unlike Santa Barbara County, in San Luis Obispo County, the Board of Supervisors has the final say on state water. And the supervisors didn't put the question to a vote.

"This is where the rubber meets the road, I guess they would say," said Deputy County Engineer Glen Priddy. At Wednesday's meeting, the question before supervisors will be whether to certify environmental impact reports on the Coastal Aqueduct pipeline and its local spur pipelines in San Luis Obispo County, and to send out state water request contracts to San Luis Obispo County water suppliers.

For the past year, San Luis Obispo County supervisors have maintained they would do what the county's water suppliers wanted — and opt for the Coastal Aqueduct if water suppliers requested state water.

But calling who's in and who's out of the State Water Project is so far about as easy as calling a thoroughbred horse race.

The city of Morro Bay had a binding vote in favor of 1,300 acre-feet a year of state water. One other binding election — this time in Nipomo — is coming up in May. The California Cities Water Co., which serves about half of Los Osos plus sizeable portions of the outskirts of the city of San Luis Obispo, also wants state water. So do Pismo Beach and Oceano.

On the other hand, Paso Robles, Arroyo Grande, and Grover Beach rejected state water without an election. The water providers serving Atascadero and Templeton have not decided yet.

The split goes deeper. Even San Luis Obispo County's Water Resources Advisory Committee fought on the state water question. Half the delegates submitted a report urging supervisors to sign up for state water and take all the county can get; the other half

booed the project and urged supervisors to opt out of it.

"If we don't take our full entitlement, Santa Barbara County will," state water supporters wrote in their half of the report. And the pipeline will run through San Luis Obispo County either way, according to the pro-water report. All the money the county has paid for the past 25 years to hang on to its state water entitlement will mean "Bottom line: we (have been) subsidizing Santa Barbara County's water."

Not so, according to the other half of the committee.

"There is no reason to believe that our county cannot be adequately supplied by local water supplies, and would probably benefit from being independent of the state water project," the state water foes on the committee wrote.

San Luis Obispo County's Engineering Department is recommending supervisors opt for the State Water Project, and take the whole 25,000 acre-feet per year it is entitled to.

The water wars will unfold Wednesday in San Luis Obispo at the Embassy Suites Hotel, where San Luis Obispo County supervisors will meet from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Little water on tap at state aqueduct

If Santa Barbara County were hooked up to the state aqueduct right now, it would be receiving less than half of the water it was paying for.

This winter's torrential rains in Southern California have done little to fill the northern reservoirs that supply 85 percent of the aqueduct's water, state officials said. Most of California, they said, is in the grip of a sixth year of drought.

"Anybody that gets water from us has a problem," said Anita Fante, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Water Resources, the agency that operates the aqueduct. "We just haven't gotten a lot of precipitation in northern California.

"But in Southern California, it's raining cats and dogs," Fante added. "If that were a normal occurrence, we would have built the reservoirs down there!"

Before the rains in February, the farms and cities along the aqueduct were receiving only 20 per-

cent of the water they had requested. On March 9, the state increased the deliveries to 35 percent of the amounts requested.

And on Friday, citing the "continuing favorable weather," the state increased water deliveries to 45 percent of requests.

Statewide, reservoir storage is only 65 percent of normal, Fante said, and the Sierra snowpack water content is 68 percent of normal. Even with normal rainfall for the rest of the season, the department has cautioned that the runoff into the Sacramento River, the main waterway supplying the aqueduct, still would be 45 percent below normal.

In 1991, the driest of the drought years since 1986, the state stopped water deliveries to farmers and cut urban users to 30 percent of requests.

— Melinda Burns