

# Proposal to Pump Desert Aquifer's Water Advances

■ **Project:** An MWD panel approves a plan to tap the Mojave. Environmentalists fear damage to ecosystem.

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Despite warnings from environmentalists that the project could damage the fragile desert ecosystem, a key committee of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California voted Monday to approve a controversial plan to pump water from beneath the Mojave Desert.

By an 8-5 vote, the committee approved a plan for the regional water agency to pump water from an aquifer in the far reaches of eastern San Bernardino County and use the aquifer to store excess Colorado River water.

Three years in the drafting, the

proposed contract between the MWD and Santa Monica-based Cadiz Land Co., which owns the property above the aquifer, goes to the full 37-member governing committee today.

Ronald Gastelum, the MWD's general manager, said the Cadiz deal is necessary to help Southern California plan for the scheduled reduction in the state's share of the Colorado River.

But the Sierra Club, Desert Survivors and other environmental groups are worried that pumping water from the aquifer could lead to a depletion of springs that provide water for desert bighorn sheep, among other animals. They also predict dust storms if the water table begins to drop.

The environmentalists were not mollified by a change in the proposed contract that would allow the federal Bureau of Land Management to halt the pumping if monitors show

the desert is suffering. In an earlier draft, that decision would have been made by a committee that included a representative of Cadiz.

The BLM and the U.S. Geological Survey have signed off on a system of electronic monitors to provide warning if the aquifer is being depleted faster than it can be recharged through rainfall.

Still, environmentalists said they worry that the Bush administration will sweep aside environmental concerns and permit pumping even if the monitors show that the desert is suffering.

"I don't think you've gone far enough," said Desert Survivors board member Bob Ellis. "I'm still very worried about this project."

Five members of the water planning, resources and planning committee voted against approval, preferring instead more delay. None, however, cited the environmentalists' concerns.

Some of the desert's environmentalists were concerned

about the financial health of Cadiz Land and the impact of rising energy costs on a project that would require water to be pumped 35 miles from the Colorado Aqueduct to the aquifer for storage.

But other members, including MWD board Chairman Philip Pace, expressed impatience at how long it has taken for the project to get to the board.

"I think we've bent over backward in an effort to hearing everybody," Pace said.

Gastelum said the Cadiz project is the key to Southern California's future water supply because it would provide a new source of water and a place to store water from the Colorado River for use during dry years.

One of the last acts of the Clinton administration was to give California another 15 years of taking more water from the Colorado River than its entitlement under a

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complex set of laws and agreements known as the Law of the River.

The MWD, which serves water agencies in six counties, has been receiving upward of 800,000 acre-feet of water more than the state's annual allocation.

MWD officials are exploring several ways to compensate for the loss of excess Colorado River water, including use of desert aquifers in Riverside County and a possible desalinization plan.

Beyond environmental concerns, the Cadiz plan is controversial because it would represent a quantum leap in making water into a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market.

Cadiz owners, including its top official, Keith Brackpool, a key water advisor to Gov. Gray Davis, stand to make substantial profits

from the arrangement.

A few MWD committee members wondered about the financial condition of Cadiz, which showed a loss in 2000 because of a decline in farm prices. The firm is a dominant player in the table grape market.

MWD officials explained that provisions in the proposed 50-year contract with Cadiz protect the water agency if Cadiz is sold or files for bankruptcy.

Still, James Blake, who represents Fullerton, said the contract "is not a good business deal."

But the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and the California Chamber of Commerce urged approval.

Helen Z. Hansen, who represents Long Beach, favors the project but noted: "It's difficult to make this kind of decision because there are always going to be enormous unknowns."