

MWD OKs Plan to Pump Desert Aquifer's Water

By TONY PERRY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The governing board of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California voted Tuesday to approve a \$1-billion, 50-year plan to pump water from beneath the Mojave Desert despite concerns that it could exhaust the water supply required to sustain plants and wildlife.

Environmentalists vowed to continue their fight to block the plan. They did not rule out a lawsuit.

By 22 to 12, the MWD board voted to approve a deal with the Santa Monica-based Cadiz Land Co. for the right to extract water from an aquifer beneath the company's property in eastern San Bernardino County. The aquifer also would be used to store surplus water from the Colorado River.

The board said the plan is necessary because California faces a major cut-back in the amount of water it receives from the Colorado River.

But even several MWD board members who voted for the project vowed to oppose it later if an environmental impact report being developed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management confirms environmentalists' fears.

Urging approval, board member John Foley, representing the Orange County water district, said that waiting for a risk-free project is folly.

"We're going to have to take a little

Please see **MOJAVE, A26**

MOJAVE: MWD Approves Plan to Pump Water From Desert Aquifer

Continued from A3

risk because we've seen what lack of risk has done to the energy business," said Foley, a reference to the state's reluctance until recently to approve construction of power plants.

But Simeon Herskovits, an attorney for the New Mexico-based Western Environmental Law Center, said that litigation is likely if the project is not considerably changed to prevent possible damages to the desert's flora and fauna.

At the heart of the environmental controversy is a scientifically complex dispute about how quickly the aquifer will be replenished by rainfall and how much water the aquifer contains.

The Sierra Club and other groups are

concerned that Cadiz, which stands to make enormous profits, has overestimated the amount of water and that pumping could exhaust the water supply needed to sustain springs vital to the survival of desert tortoises, bighorn sheep and other wildlife.

The rainfall that replenishes the aquifer falls over a vast region, including mountains about 40 miles from the desert. Scientists have disagreed about how quickly that water travels underground to the aquifer and about how much of it evaporates. To convince the Bureau of Land Management that the plan will not cause environmental destruction, MWD and Cadiz have devised a system of monitoring devices meant to warn when the aquifer,

about 200 feet below the desert flow, starts receding faster than predicted.

Ronald Gastelum, MWD general manager, said he is not surprised that the environmentalists are threatening a lawsuit.

"If a lawsuit is simply [that] we failed to consider the environmental impact, I think it will be unsuccessful," he said. "We've gone to extraordinary lengths" to provide a monitoring system.

Although the controversy was over water, the state's energy plight also figured in the debate.

Escalating energy costs could increase the expense of the project because of the energy needed to pump the water.

Sierra Club water resource consultant David Czamanske warned that signing a contract with a private company with money problems like Cadiz is inviting disaster. The firm lost money last year on its agricultural holdings and, according to documents given to the MWD board, has a large amount of debt.

For the Record