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Nipomo leans toward desalination to water woes

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A desalination plant that could cost up to \$100 million appears to be the likeliest option for an additional water source in Nipomo, according to the town's services district board president.

The Nipomo Community Services District board has narrowed several options that it has considered in recent months to two: buying state water or building a desalination plant.

A desal plant would cost between \$80 million and \$100 million, according to a study completed for the district by consultants Boyle Engineering. And the plant could take at least eight years to complete, the report says. The board may choose either state water or desalination, or both, according to district General Manager Bruce Buel. But the district can't afford state water and desalination.

The board is expected to vote at a Dec. 12 meeting, Buel said. Given the choices, district board President Michael Winn believes desalination would be the best long-term source of water.

"It's the only long-term, sustainable drought-proof source of water on the coast," Winn said. "We should be thankful we're not out in the Mojave Desert."

For more than seven years, the district has been looking for additional water for Nipomo.

Several studies show that too much water is being pumped out of the underground aquifers, the district's only source of drinking water. No cost estimates are available for the state water, which would require the pipeline that runs through Nipomo and then to Santa Barbara. The district is negotiating the details of its state water option and information is expected in November.

The district would need approval from several agencies involved in the State Water Project, including the county, the state Department of Water Resources and the Central Coast Water Authorities, whose member agencies include many Santa Barbara County communities.

Winn said he's confident the district can collect the money needed to build a desal plant.

Board member Ed Eby agreed that funding shouldn't be a problem, noting that the district can accumulate funds while the project is in the planning stages.

"You probably won't need more than \$5 million up until the time you

building," Eby said.

Nipomo's proposed desal plant could produce up to 6,300 acre-ft water per year, which could support the maximum development that occur there under county planning regulations.

Supplemental water fees from new development and payments from customers are the district's primary sources of revenue, Buel said. Water rates for the district's customers are scheduled to increase 5 percent in April 2008 and by an additional 8 percent in January 2009. Those rates were adopted in anticipation of supplemental water charges when the district was considering a pipeline to bring water from Santa Maria to Nipomo, Buel said.

But the money can be applied to a different supplemental water source if added.

In its report, Boyle Engineering suggested three sites for the desalination: the South San Luis Obispo County Sanitation District facility, a parcel adjacent to the ConocoPhillips refinery along Highway 1, and a 3-acre undeveloped parcel near Highway 1 and Oso Flaco Road.

The parcels near the refinery and off Oso Flaco aren't owned by the district and would require purchase or a lease.

The sanitation district must agree to a site at that location. The district's operations are overseen by a board that includes representatives from the cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach and the Oceano Community Services District.

Meanwhile, the county Board of Supervisors last week unanimously approved to allow a study to proceed on a supplemental water fee for new development.

That fee would apply to projects on the Nipomo Mesa outside the district boundaries. The sanitation district already has a fee of \$12,060 per single-family residence.

The district and other users in the Nipomo Mesa Water Conservation District share the same groundwater source, which is in overdraft, Buel said. If groundwater tables continue to drop, it could lead to seawater intrusion, contaminating the water supply, officials say.

Supervisors said they didn't think a building moratorium in Nipomo was necessary — an idea that county planners proposed for discussion. But the district remains in a Level 3 severity status adopted by the county — which is the most serious planning designation assessing dwindling water resources. That designation requires water conservation measures.