

NCS D to renegotiate SM water purchase

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor

The Nipomo Community Services District board directed its staff Wednesday to renegotiate buying supplemental water from Santa Maria while moving forward on a long-range plan to build a desalination plant.

At the same time, directors tabled any further work on tapping into the State Water Project unless it appears that a new "intertie" pipeline from Santa Maria is infeasible or too expensive.

Regardless of whether the district buys water from Santa Maria or from the State Water Project, Nipomo residents can expect to see water bills at least double and possibly triple.

And water bills could be quadruple what they are now to cover the cost of desalination, according to information provided by general manager Bruce Buel.

The decisions came after directors received a presentation from representatives of Boyle Engineering on the potential of buying state water through the Central Coast Water Authority.

Boyle gave directors a similar report on desalination in October.

The options of desalination and buying state water were explored after the district halted a plan to buy water from Santa Maria when the estimated costs of a pipeline from Santa Maria to Nipomo ballooned from about \$6 million to as much as \$27 million.

While directors reinforced their determination to pursue desalination as a long-term solution, the uncertainties involved in purchasing state water prompted them to return to the Santa Maria intertie as a short-term solution to the continuing overdraft of Nipomo's groundwater basin.

"There's no perfect solution here," Buel told the board. "There are risks and rewards to each of the options, but we continue to believe desalination is the cornerstone of the future water supply for the community."

Directors agreed and voted 5-0 "to proceed with all deliberate speed" on a desalination plant.

In his motion, Director Ed Eby also directed staff to explore the possibility of reactivating or salvaging parts of Santa Barbara's now-defunct desal plant.

Although Buel indicated the technologically outdated Santa Barbara plant has been gutted and its reverse osmosis membranes sold to Saudi Arabia, Eby said the possibility should be investigated if for no other reason than to rule it out.

Eby also moved to restart negotiations with Santa Maria on an intertie project, investigate the possibility of reducing the cost of the pipeline and restart the California Environmental Quality Act analysis of the plan.

That was approved on a 4-1 vote, with Director Jim Harrison dissenting because "we're not getting the information we need to make a decision."

But after a motion by Director Larry Vierheilig to continue exploring state water died for lack of a second, Harrison moved to table that option, although he noted that might go against some public perceptions.

“One of the problems with not studying (state water) is a perception by some in the community that we should be getting water out of the pipeline,” he said.

The 5-0 decision to table the option was based on a number of uncertainties, including gaining approval from the current users to join the State Water Project, the need and costs to upgrade pumping and treatment facilities at Polonio Pass, and getting the required voter approval.

Nipomo voters rejected joining the State Water Project when it was first proposed in the late 1980s and early '90s, and a referendum at that time tied any purchase of state water to a public vote.

In addition, the Boyle report indicated it could take five to seven years to start receiving state water, while water from Santa Maria could be available in three to four years.

In a report to the board, Buel provided estimates of what NCS D customers can expect to pay for the various projects on their water bills.

Based on serving 4,100 customers, bimonthly water bills would rise by \$100 to \$180 for state water, \$142 for Santa Maria water and \$308 for desalinated water.

With a customer base of 5,000, the increase in costs would be slightly lower, from \$83.40 to \$152 for state water, \$117 for Santa Maria water and \$254 for desalinated water.

Those costs would be on top of the average \$80 bimonthly bills paid by the district's approximately 2,500 current customers.

But according to figures developed for the district by Science Applications International Corp., the district will need 4,750 acre-feet of water per year to maintain current groundwater levels with zero growth.

Without supplemental water, the groundwater basin will reach sea level in 11 to 12 years, and the minimum of 65,000 acre-feet above sea level that some experts say is required to prevent saltwater intrusion could be reached in as little as two years.

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