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Need ... water ...

A SLO nonprofit raises questions about the Nipomo waterline intertie project

BY AMY ASMAN



Pipeline of the future

A rendering of the Nipomo Waterline Intertie Project shows the existing pipeline in blue and the proposed pipeline, which would pump water from the Santa Maria River Basin to the Nipomo area, in orange.

IMAGE COURTESY AECOM/NIPOMO COMMUNITY SERVICES DISTRICT

A project proposing that the Nipomo Community Services District buy water from Santa Maria and have it delivered via pipeline hit a slight snag at the Santa Maria City Council's Dec. 1 meeting.

The council members were set to discuss the Nipomo Waterline Intertie Project—and possibly approve a wholesale water agreement with the district—but instead chose to continue the matter. The City Council was originally scheduled to discuss it at its Dec. 15 meeting. However, Utilities Engineer Steve Kahn said the issue has been continued to Jan. 5 to give the city more time to compose a response.

Earlier that day, the city received a letter from environmental nonprofit San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper claiming the certified environmental impact report submitted by the district fails to provide “substantial evidence” that the intertie project will have a less than significant impact on water flows in the Santa Maria River.

The letter also contends that the city's agreement to sell and deliver water to the district constitutes a separate project that requires its own review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

“We want the City Council to know that we're not opposed to the project. Nipomo needs water—no one's disputing that. But we have concerns with the process,” San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper director Gordon Hensley said. “We believe that the City Council has a greater responsibility than to simply rubber-stamp an EIR.”

Hensley said his organization believes the community services district's EIR adequately addresses environmental concerns under the district's jurisdiction. But under CEQA guidelines, the city of Santa Maria “must take care of the impacts under its own jurisdiction,” he said.

“The main issue is that the underflow of the river itself supports some aquatic life and vegetation,” he said. “The city needs to assess the impact of withdrawing water on the overall function of the river.”

According to the Nipomo Community Services District's EIR, the proposed project could result in a substantial depletion of the Santa Maria Groundwater Basin, “such that there would be a net deficit in aquifer volume or a lowering of the local groundwater table level.”

However, the report considers those potential impacts to be less than significant.

A city staff report distributed to council members before the meeting said “the city has water of a sufficient quality and quantity to supply supplemental water to Nipomo and therefore, there are no significant environmental impacts to the city.”

The most recent Santa Maria Urban Water Management Plan estimated the city's water resources at 49,910 acre-feet per year in both normal and dry years.

A 2005 settlement stipulation reached as a result of a lawsuit commonly referred to as the Santa Maria Groundwater Litigation requires the city try to provide the Nipomo area with a minimum of 2,500 acre-feet of supplemental water.

According to the city staff report, the project is divided into a three-tier system that requires NCS D to purchase, and the city to deliver, a minimum of approximately 2,000 to 3,000 acre-feet of water each year. The water is priced at \$1,063.37 per acre-foot of water—or \$2.44 per hundred cubic feet. The rate is scheduled to increase 5 percent on July 1, 2010, and again on July 1, 2011, to keep up with inflation, the staff report said.

If approved, the wholesale water agreement would be in effect from the time the pipeline is scheduled for completion (January 2012) to June 2085.

But San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper's Hensley said it's not a question of whether or not the city has enough drinking water to go around.

“The Santa Maria River is always a river, even if you don't see any water in it,” Hensley explained.

If the city sends some of its water to Nipomo, he said, “There may not be enough water underground to keep [water] on the surface.”

To illustrate his point, Hensley conjured up the image of a straw sucking water from the bottom of a sponge.

"If you keep sucking water off the bottom, the sponge's ability to support water on top is damaged," he said.

The lack of water flow causes problems for local wildlife, he added—especially steelhead trout.

Currently, the California Department of Fish and Game is conducting a full study on the stream flows of four California rivers, including the Santa Maria River, as part of a settlement reached with California Coastkeeper, of which San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper is a member.

Based on this information, Hensley said, San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper believes "more work has to be done before [the City Council] can approve this."

In its report, city staff said the project would be "revenue neutral" in the worst-case scenario and generate revenue under most other scenarios. The report also says the sale of supplemental water to the Nipomo Community Services District would have a positive impact on the community of Nipomo by implementing groundwater restoration and preservation, and by improving the groundwater basin balance.

In a recent interview with the Sun, Santa Maria Utilities Director Rick Sweet said the city is working on a response to San Luis Obispo Coastkeeper's letter.

Added Senior Utilities Engineer Kahn: "We feel very confident on how we stand on this, both from the legal and environmental side."

If the city doesn't address Coastkeeper's concerns, Hensley said, they could be headed to court.

"We'll have to evaluate our options based on the city's response," he said. "This is the kind of thing that could go to court. But I always like to resolve things without paying lawyers."

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