



Pipeline will forestall saltwater intrusion, NCSD experts say

By Mike Hodgson / Associate Editor / mhodgson@santamariatimes.com | Posted: Monday, June 27, 2011 12:05 am

Slick color brochures began arriving in Nipomo residents' mailboxes last week in the first salvo of a growing battle over a pipeline to bring supplemental water to the Mesa.

Produced by a consultant for the Nipomo Community Services District, the brochures don't even mention the proposed pipeline or the assessment district to pay for the \$25 million project.

Instead, they plant seeds for thought about the Mesa's limited water supply, potential saltwater intrusion and the need for additional water.

"The next one will expand on the issue," said Michael LeBrun, NCSD general manager, who envisions sending out up to four brochures over the next three months.

District officials also plan to hold meetings to explain the project to homeowners associations, nonprofit organizations, service clubs and others.

That project is a pipeline to carry water the district plans to buy from the city of Santa Maria to reduce the amount of groundwater being pumped on the Nipomo Mesa.

The need

NCSD officials say the pipeline is required by the 2005 settlement in a lawsuit filed over rights to water in the Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin, which extends from Santa Maria to the Five Cities area.

But even more important, they say, is the need to prevent saltwater from flowing into the basin from the Pacific Ocean, which could happen if the groundwater level drops too low.

"We've got 30,000 people here and one source of water," LeBrun said, noting that increasing demand has brought the groundwater level down.

"But the Pacific Ocean is not going down," he continued. "As we pump the groundwater down, (seawater) will continue to advance. It is advancing today, although it's not in the basin yet."

The fact that no saltwater intrusion has been detected in sentry wells near the coastline is one reason critics say there's no need for a supplemental water project.

"Our opponents say we're scaring people, we've got a boogie man," LeBrun said. "But back in 2009, there was an indication of seawater intrusion up in the Northern Cities, and that's pretty scary."

Possible saltwater intrusion was detected in a sentry well that monitors the Northern Cities Management Area of the basin that serves Grover Beach, Arroyo Grande and Oceano Community Services District.

LeBrun said those purveyors reduced the amount of groundwater they were pumping and used more from supplemental sources — Lopez Lake and State Water — that Nipomo doesn't have.

He added that in Los Osos, saltwater is intruding on the groundwater basin at the rate of 260 feet a year.

LeBrun said project opponents gloss over the "pumping depression" that exists south of Blacklake Golf Resort and north of the Woodlands.

The groundwater level there is lower than throughout the rest of the basin, and NCSD officials worry that if the depression grows, it could pull in seawater.

Opponents say water the district wants to buy from Santa Maria comes from the same basin, so it would be cheaper to just let the water flow from south to north as it does naturally.

However, LeBrun said the basin is much deeper in Santa Maria than under the Nipomo Mesa, and the general flow is not from south to north but from east to west.

“It’s much better to be pumping from over the deep part of the basin, the major producing portion, rather than here,” he said.

“If supplemental water was in place, we could manage the basin,” he said. “The depression goes away. Then we can hopefully ride out a drought. Drought is just weather. We know we’ll have another one.”

The project

NCSD plans to buy a blend of groundwater, State Water and Twitchell Reservoir water from Santa Maria, LeBrun said.

An 18- or 24-inch pipeline would connect to the city’s water system on North Blosser Road, then travel beneath the Santa Maria River and up onto the Nipomo Mesa.

Water would be stored there in a large, partially buried concrete tank and pumped into the district’s existing pipeline on Orchard Road.

New pipes also would be installed to carry water into the system on West Tefft Street east of Highway 101 and at Division Street.

New chloramination treatment systems would also be installed to replace the existing chlorination system.

The construction cost is estimated at \$23.5 million. Including so-called “soft costs,” the grand total is pegged at \$25.3 million.

The water itself would cost \$1,300 per acre-foot, LeBrun said, and the initial delivery would be 3,000 acre-feet per year, although a potential second phase could add another 3,200 acre-feet.

Although all the water would go to NCSD, the costs would be shared by the Mesa’s other water purveyors — Woodlands Mutual Water Co., Rural Water Co. and Golden State Water Co.

Two types of bonds would be sold to pay for the work, with the bonds repaid through an assessment district that would have to be approved by a majority of property owners.

If the assessment district is rejected, the district and other water companies would have to look at another funding source, LeBrun said.

“The (NCSD) board and other purveyors would need to show diligence to get this built, so we would have to come back to rates,” he said. “But it would be a huge rate increase.

“Rates are only applied to customers,” he continued. “An assessment district distributes benefits (and costs) to all parcels — developed, undeveloped and underdeveloped. It shares the burden more broadly.”

Alternatives

Critics say if supplemental water must be obtained, there are better methods, including tapping directly into the State Water pipeline that travels right down Thompson Avenue, or building a desalination plant.

But LeBrun said the district investigated both of those possibilities. To tap into State Water would require approval by Nipomo residents, who have already rejected it twice.

It also would require the approval of six State Water customers south of the Mesa, which LeBrun said is unlikely, and it would cost more than \$25 million to tap into the line.

The cost of a desalination plant would be astronomical, not even considering how to deal with the environmental issues of discharging the brine that’s produced.

For those reasons, he said, the pipeline is the most economical way to reduce pumping on the Mesa and forestall saltwater intrusion.

“It’s never going to be cheaper than it is today,” LeBrun said. “And I don’t want to come across as being insensitive to cost. We are very sensitive to cost.

“But I’ve got to give this my all to get this through because it’s that important to the area and to our customers.” he said.