

## TOP FEATURED NEWS

### Moving Water

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor

Two public information campaigns kicked into high gear last week for a proposed pipeline to bring at least 3,000 acre-feet of water to the Nipomo Mesa from Santa Maria each year.

One campaign, mounted by Nipomo Community Services District, supports the pipeline as a court-ordered project that will provide supplemental water in the most economical way feasible.

The other campaign, by the grass-roots Mesa Community Alliance, opposes the pipeline as an excessively expensive and unnecessary project that will not provide any new water.

MCA members say the NCS D campaign is using scare tactics, exaggerated facts and false assumptions as it prepares for an election on an assessment district to pay for the \$25 million project.

NCS D officials say the MCA campaign is downplaying the Mesa's water problems, misinterpreting data and using scare tactics to defeat the assessment district and cancel the pipeline.

In this issue, we look at the project and why each side is passionate about its position.

Pipeline will forestall saltwater intrusion, NCS D experts say 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, NCS D 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**

NCS D 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.

## **Opponents say pipeline won’t solve issues**

Opponents of the proposed supplemental water pipeline from Santa Maria launched their campaign last week with the first of a series of meetings.

More than 100 people gathered in the Mesa Middle School gymnasium June 16 to hear members of the Mesa Community Alliance offer their analysis of what they say is an unnecessary project.

The meeting coincided with the mailing of a Nipomo Community Services District brochure that says the Mesa's groundwater basin faces the threat of saltwater intrusion, so a supplemental water source is necessary.

"It's pretty, but it doesn't say too much," MCA spokesman Larry Versaw told the crowd as he held one of the brochures aloft. "We don't have thousands of dollars to hire a PR firm, but what we do have is facts, and we want to share (them) with you."

The meeting focused on issues for customers of Rural Water Co., which serves Cypress Ridge and other nearby areas.

Future meetings are planned for customers of Golden State Water Co., which serves the south end of the Mesa, and Woodlands Mutual Water Co.

Although there is no official membership roster, MCA consists of a core group of seven people plus others who serve as contributing resources, Versaw said.

"It's very informal," he explained. "There is no leadership structure, no requirement for anybody to sign up or pay dues. But we've found we work together pretty effectively."

He said the members include engineers, a management analyst, an attorney and others from all areas of the Nipomo Mesa.

While some members might say the group was formed specifically to oppose the pipeline, Versaw said that's not the case.

"We came together to try and give a voice to the whole Mesa about some of the issues we might be confronted with," he said. "The first thing we came across was the (pipeline), so that was our first focus."

Their goal is not only defeating the proposed assessment district to pay for the \$25.3 million project but also petitioning the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors to intervene and find a regional solution to water issues.

To pressure the county into taking action, the group is collecting signatures on petitions to be presented to the board.

### **A fictional crisis**

"This is a really complex issue, and we know it is," Versaw told the crowd at the first meeting. "It's difficult to distill down to one presentation."

But simply stated, MCA members believe the pipeline will not provide additional sources of water and is unnecessary, unreliable, excessively expensive and unfairly funded.

Members say NCSO is creating a fictional water crisis — using scare tactics to make residents believe the groundwater basin is in imminent danger of saltwater intrusion.

Bill Petrick, a registered professional engineer, disputes the district's claim that the groundwater level is dropping, which could lead to saltwater intrusion.

Petrick said the Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin is deeper in Santa Maria than it is under the Nipomo Mesa and the even shallower Northern Cities portion.

He said the higher pressure of the deeper portion pushes water to the lower-pressure shallow areas, creating a south-to-north flow.

“As long as we have positive pressure here, we can’t get seawater intrusion,” Petrick said, noting that saltwater has not been detected in the sentinel wells that monitor the western portion of the basin.

“So when the PR people come out with this ‘growing threat of saltwater intrusion,’ that’s their spin, but it’s not real,” Petrick said.

MCA claims that despite increased pumping to support development, the level of the groundwater basin has not dropped.

Petrick points to a chart comparing rainfall and groundwater levels over the past 35 years.

“The aquifer mirrors rainfall,” he said. “(The chart) shows our average rainfall is about 16 inches. But it also shows our water level goes up and down as rainfall goes up and down, and it’s almost flat.

“One of the claims of the PR group in our famous brochure is that ... the evidence is clear we’re using more water than exists in the natural water supply,” he said. “Well, I think the evidence is clear that we’re not.”

NCSD officials agree the basin level mirrors rainfall, but they say the basin is reacting faster to drought and recovering slower when rain returns.

Petrick also said the courts are monitoring the basin level through the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group’s reports.

He said if the level hits the point that triggers a severe water shortage condition, as nearly happened from 1990 to 1994, or if saltwater intrusion is discovered in a sentinel well, the court will step in and take over.

“If there is seawater intrusion, there is a 10- to 20-year time lag before it reaches the production wells,” Petrick said. “So again, don’t listen to the scare tactics. Listen to the scientists.”

### **Excessive cost**

Petrick said something that should scare the public is the amount of money MCA claims the pipeline project will cost over a 30-year period.

“This story is about a pipeline, and it’s going to be expensive,” MCA member Pat Eby told the crowd at the meeting. “But the most expensive thing about it is the cost of the water that will move through it for 30 years.”

Eby pegs that total at \$400 million.

She said the capital cost of the pipeline will be \$80 million, which includes the construction, the cost of floating the bonds and the interest they will accrue, while the cost of operation and maintenance will be \$52 million.

But the total cost of the water over the 30-year term will be \$268 million, which she bases on Santa Maria’s charge of \$1,443 per acre-foot plus a projected 5 percent increase per year.

NCSD puts the charge at about \$1,300 per acre-foot.

MCA members also believe it’s not fair that those who use half the water on the Mesa will foot the entire bill for the pipeline and the water it carries.

Private, unregulated wells pump about 5,500 acre-feet per year. ConocoPhillips pumps about 1,200 acre-feet per year — a guaranteed allowance — and that number could rise if the refinery is expanded.

NCSD pumps about 2,560 acre-feet, Golden State about 1,290, Rural Water about 880 and Woodlands about 810 acre-feet.

The four purveyors and their customers will share the cost of the project even though the water will go only to NCSD,.

Woodlands and Golden State have emergency interties with the district's system, but Rural Water does not.

### **Other alternatives**

MCA members believe there must be better alternatives than the pipeline, and they think the expertise of the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group should be brought to bear to find those alternatives.

NCSD officials point out, however, that the technical group's three annual reports say the pipeline should be built as quickly as possible.

MCA members also point out the pipeline is not absolutely mandated in the lawsuit settlement. The judge in the case ruled the pipeline can be removed from the agreement if its construction proves infeasible.

"The court did retain jurisdiction over this whole matter and did leave the door open that ... if things change, which they have, the court could be petitioned to change the conditions," Versaw said.

NCSD general manager Michael LeBrun said that's not an option at this point.

"We, the purveyors, would have a hard time going to the court right now and pleading to remove this because we haven't done anything on it yet," LeBrun said.