

Viewpoint: Pipeline first, then desalination
By Sam Saltoun
Sam Saltoun The Tribune

Let's just say for argument's sake that we accept Nipomo Mesa Community Alliance's position on Nipomo's supplemental water project. We would then vote "no" on funding the project with a property tax assessment, and expect to build a desalination plant instead.

What would we need to do next?

- 1) Find hydrogeologists and water resource managers who agree with us that the pumping depression under the Mesa is not a severe problem. That way we may:
- 2) Persuade the SLO County Board of Supervisors to remove the Level of Severity III designation from the Nipomo's groundwater supply. Then we can:
- 3) Try to get the Superior Court to reverse itself and vacate its final judgment on the 2005 stipulation between public water producers. That clears the way for us to:
- 4) Cancel the supplemental water project, and
- 5) Begin the decade-long process of obtaining approval, designing, funding and building a desalination plant large enough to meet our needs.

An adequately sized desalination plant is expensive. Even if one were to magically appear here tomorrow at no cost to us, we'd still need to build almost eight miles of pipeline to get the new water to the Mesa. That's more than two miles more pipeline than the current project requires.

There's also another possible scenario after we vote "no."

We can't find any water resource experts who support us; the Board of Supervisors doesn't remove the Mesa's Level III severity rating; the court won't vacate the stipulation, but rather enforces its physical solution of building the pipeline; the delay and a different method of funding prevents us from obtaining financing at today's historic low interest rates; and the new higher cost gets paid out of user fees instead of property tax bills.

I have appreciated desalination ever since my involvement in the desal plant operation at Guantanamo Bay in the early 1970s after Castro cut our Navy base waterline. Desalination makes good water. It makes new water. However, in our case, "the perfect is the enemy of the good."

We could still move toward desalination as the Mesa Community Alliance advocates, and as the Nipomo Community Services District has studied, but our path there includes

building the supplemental water pipeline first. We need to start replenishing our depleting aquifer now.

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