

# Proposed water timeline gets year extension

Desalination

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SANTA CRUZ — The proposed timeline for constructing a seawater desalination plant has been extended by a year to 2016 to allow for more time to review potential environmental effects.

An environmental impact study is under way on a plant that could produce 2.5 million gallons of potable water each day as new supply source for the Santa Cruz Water Department and neighboring Soquel Creek Water District. The draft report is expected to be completed early next year, but several opposition groups are poised to fight the project, at the ballot box or in court.

Public comments in response

to the environmental report are expected to be voluminous, and project planners have determined construction of the plant will go beyond the original 2015 estimate. A partial design study is expected by year's end so the two agencies can more quickly move forward if the project is eventually approved.

Dan Kriege, a member of the Soquel Creek Water District board, urged minimizing delays to reduce opposition and take advantage of lower construction and materials cost.

"It's prudent to get a project under design and out to bid as soon as possible," he said.

"The more time we take, the more exposure we put this project to among the people who don't like it."

Wednesday, a joint task force approved a preliminary budget of \$3 million for project planning and management in the fiscal year beginning July 1. Pre-construction costs, split equally between the two agencies, cover the cost of the environmental report, design, public promotion and other planning issues. Construction costs will be split on a 59-41 basis. Bill Kocher, Santa Cruz water director, addressed concerns about wavering estimates for the total cost of the project, including construction of the plant likely on the Westside of Santa Cruz. An initial estimate dating back to 2002 was \$35 million, but now estimates exceed \$100 million.

Kocher said there is no way to provide a solid estimate because

42111  
budgeting for an intake facility, treatment plant and mechanism to share the water with Soquel Creek Water District could be 30-50 percent higher than expected.

"As you get better specificity in the project design, you get a better estimate on cost," Kocher said. "There is still an awful lot unknown."

Kocher and other desalination proponents argue Santa Cruz needs a new supply to offset drought years and a reduction in diversions from the city's largest sources, four North Coast streams and the San Lorenzo River. But opponents argue greater conservation is the better environmental choice, considering the energy required to run the plant and dispense of the salt removed from seawater.