

Water district keeps its options open

By JONDI GUMZ
Sentinel staff writer

Soquel Creek board hires consultant to evaluate desalination, other plans

SOQUEL — To keep its supply options open, the Soquel Creek Water District has settled a lawsuit over its plans to buy 32 acres near Soquel-San Jose Road.

The land, known as the Leporini property, is key to one of three alternatives under study to keep the district's 45,000 customers supplied with water 30 years from now. Even with aggressive water-conservation efforts, the district projects an annual shortfall of 2,000 acre feet by the year 2030.

An acre-foot is roughly the amount of water an average family of four uses in a year.

Owning the Leporini property would enable the district to boost supplies by treating water siphoned from Soquel Creek during the winter. District officials said it was the last site suitable for such a project.

"Knowing how difficult it is to develop supply, you have to be thinking ahead,"

said Laura Brown, district general manager.

The lawsuit was filed five months ago by attorney Bill Parkin, representing Save the Habitat, which demanded an environmental review before the district exercised an option to buy the property.

"Once they purchase the land, you know they're committed to the project," Parkin said.

Under terms of the settlement, the district rescinded its option to buy the property, which was due to expire, and negotiated a new expiration date of March 15, 2001.

The district also has agreed to hire a San Francisco-based consultant, Environmental Science Associates, for \$94,000 to evaluate the feasibility of the three options to increase water supply and prepare cost estimates. The price tag is likely to be in the millions. The report is supposed to be

ready by the end of March.

The other two options are to develop a desalination plant or work with another agency, like the Santa Cruz Water Department, which has twice as many customers, on a regional desalination plant. Either way, the plant would take salt out of seawater to meet drinking-water standards.

In the meantime, the district is encouraging customers to conserve, offering a \$100 rebate to people who buy a water-saving clothes washer, which costs more than the standard design. So far, 100 rebates have been granted, and the district is offering 100 more.

Santa Cruz, which has a water supply that shrinks in drought years, has been looking for a backup system, but it's not yet clear whether there is political support for a regional solution.

Bill Kocher, the Santa Cruz water chief,

said he finds a regional desalination plant "intriguing," but the Santa Cruz City Council hasn't taken a position. Kocher expects to present the option to council members at a special meeting at 3 p.m. Feb. 29.

Water-supply projects tend to be unpopular because they are associated with growth, and Santa Cruz politicians tend to oppose growth.

Even if the city is willing to partner with the Soquel Creek Water District, the relationship could be problematic. The water district is under pressure to pick a solution because its option to buy the Leporini property will expire in a year. City officials may not be ready to move that fast.

"City agencies tend to act more slowly because water is one of many issues," Kocher said. "As long as people turn on their taps and water comes out, it's easy to forget it's a finite supply."