

# Santa Cruz water director to retire



KOCHER

**BILL KOCHER:** Desal proponent led utility for 27 years; departure's impact on plant unclear

By J.M. BROWN

jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Bill Kocher, who has managed Santa Cruz's water supply through a major drought, devastating earthquake and divisive plans to build a seawater desalina-

tion plant, announced his retirement Thursday.

When Kocher, 65, leaves Sept. 13 it will mark the end of a 27-year career as the man in charge of providing safe and reliable water and sewer service to 90,000 people from the North Coast to Live Oak.

The departure has far-reaching implications as the City Council and ratepayers determine how to solve a long-standing supply shortage in dry years while also answering a mandate to ease river and stream diversions for the protection of endangered and

threatened fish.

No other figure has more closely shaped the debate over desalination, which will only intensify in coming months as the city prepares a final environmental analysis before eventually seeking council and voter approval. It's unclear

how Kocher's departure could affect the plan's progress.

Kocher said desalination — and the growing political opposition to it — played no role in his decision to leave.

"I don't have any quit in me,"

SEE KOCHER ON A2

## KOCHER

Continued from A1

he told the Sentinel. "There is no chance I would walk away from something."

The grandfather of three and prostate cancer survivor said he told City Manager Martín Bernal more than a year ago he intended to retire at 65. His birthday was in July.

"It's time for a new chapter," Kocher said. "It's really that simple."

Bernal said it will be difficult to replace Kocher, who was hired in 1985 as the Water Department's finance chief and was promoted to its leader in 1986. He managed the drought of 1987-1992 and saw the city through the Loma Prieta quake of 1989.

Kocher also has run a department whose customers became among the lowest water users in the state and has led a decades-long quest for a new supply amid political and environmental obstacles to storing more water. A dozen years ago, he voluntarily entered negotiations with state and federal regulators over fish habitat.

"He has been an incredible asset to the city over the years," Bernal said. "It's never a good time to lose a highly capable person."

### IMPACT ON DESAL

Bernal and Mayor Hilary Bryant, who preside over a city more focused on public safety problems and a recovering economy than a vulnerable water supply, said no decisions have been made about whether to proceed with the original desal

**'His ability to explain complicated water supply issues in a way that makes it easy for the council to understand will be sorely missed.'**

SANTA CRUZ MAYOR HILARY BRYANT

timeline, which included a ballot measure as early as June 2014.

Although a small but vocal group of critics have been assailing desal for some time, public concern about the \$129 million plant to remove salt from oceanwater to make drinking water reached new heights this summer after a draft environmental review revealed the possibility of placing a pump station near residential areas and a school.

Even as Monday's deadline for making public comment on the review looms, Bryant said city leaders have long benefited from Kocher's matter-of-fact style and "encyclopedic knowledge" of a system more than 100 years old.

"His ability to explain complicated water supply issues in a way that makes it easy for the council to understand will be sorely missed," Bryant said.

But Kocher has had his share of detractors, too, who made him the face of desal as he carried out a council decision in 2005 to pursue that technology as a fix for worst-case shortages predicted to reach nearly 50 percent. Greater potential for water savings among customers has since improved that outlook, but Kocher has irked conservationists by strongly maintaining that city officials seek a more industrial solution.

"With city water security within reach, it is time to cut our financial losses in pursuing the desal project," said Rick Longinotti, founder of Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives. "We urge the city to search for a water director who can implement a water-neutral development policy to prevent growth in water demand from eroding the city's current water security."

The city and its desalination partner, Soquel Creek Water District, which hired a new director this year, have collectively spent about \$15 million to date. It's too early to know the effect of the changes in leadership.

"I think everyone is going to pretty much focus on the issue," Thomas LaHue, board president said of the district's need to reduce groundwater pumping. "Getting to where we need to go is the most important thing."

Still, LaHue said, "Bill has got a good long-term perspective that few other people have. He sometimes wishes that people could understand what it was like to go through a drought. That kind of background and knowledge is hard to replace."

### THE DAYS AHEAD

Linette Almond, the deputy water director, will serve as interim director while a national search is conducted. Kocher, who

## AT A GLANCE

BILL KOCHER

**AGE:** 65

**OCCUPATION:** Director of Santa Cruz Water Department since 1986; retiring Sept. 13.

**HOME:** Unincorporated Santa Cruz County

**EDUCATION:**

Undergraduate degree in education and psychology from Blackburn College; master's degree in counseling and psychology from Chicago State University

**FAMILY:** Wife Susan; three children; three grandchildren

earned \$184,210 last year, said Chris Berry, watershed compliance manager, will carry on talks with fish regulators whose demands he said are so severe they are now the key reason to pursue desal.

A college psychology major who left a career in teaching to enter utility management, Kocher said he is confident in the technical expertise of his staff. The Chicago-area native said he has long followed advice from the man who hired him, retired Santa Cruz City Manager Dick Wilson.

"As a non-engineer, I know what to keep my fingers off of," Kocher said.

But, in Santa Cruz, managing water also means managing politics.

"If there is one guiding thing," Kocher said, "it is that you have to do what you think is right, regardless of cost, regardless of fallout."

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL