

Survey: Strong support for desal

5-20-14

District's voters favor recycled water far less

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SOQUEL » More than two-thirds of voters within the Soquel Creek Water District think desalination is a viable way to generate a new supply and recover the groundwater basin, according to a recent poll.

Goodwin Simon Strategic Research reports that 70 percent of 301 respondents surveyed on the phone in mid-March said removing salt from seawater and treating it for use in homes and businesses was an excellent or good idea. Far fewer, just 45 percent, thought using recycled water — highly treated wastewater — was

a good option.

Melanie Schumacher, special projects engineer, said the strong support for desalination was not surprising considering similar results from a poll in 2010.

"Our customers recognize that water is an important aspect of our community and quality of life, and

DESAL » PAGE 5



Cabrillo College students hear about maintaining water quality during a drought from Soquel Creek Water District's Vaidehi Campbell, at right, on the site of district's Estates Well.

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Desal

FROM PAGE 1

are also concerned about the environment and the threat of seawater contamination to our drinking water wells," Schumacher said. "Our customers do a great job at conserving and have been very supportive of the studies and evaluation that we've been doing over the years in terms of developing a supplemental supply." The district, serving 35,000 people from Capitola to La Selva Beach, has been working for years with the city of Santa Cruz on development of a joint seawater desal plant to address the district's long-term groundwater overdraft and the city's drought vulnerability.

But last summer, the city suspended pursuit of desal after 72 percent of voters in 2012 supported requiring a future ballot measure on the plan, which a community-driven panel will analyze along with other options during the coming year. While the city began rationing residential customers on May 1 to address the current drought, the district is planning to begin rationing in the fall while also considering its own desal plant or joining a regional Moss Landing-based project.

Chris Coburn, an analyst with Santa Cruz County's water resources division, said contrasting views about desal among district and city customers could indicate a greater determination to act quickly on developing a long-term plan. Cost also could play a role if a supply source isn't identified soon for Soquel Creek.

"I think a possible reason for the seemingly heightened awareness and accep-

tance of desal in the Soquel Creek Water District is potentially due to tiered pricing and the resulting high water bills," Coburn said. "It could be that we'd see a shift in the sentiment in Santa Cruz after the first round of bills go out that reflect rationing."

Other highlights of the survey include:

- 81 percent said they have cut back on water use as much as they can.

- 19 percent believe the district's long-term water supply problem could be fixed by simply reducing consumption.

- When told a mandatory program requires offsetting new water use by 200 percent, two-thirds said they would support development while a quarter want it banned.

The district's board plans to discuss a moratorium on new hook-ups June 3. Meanwhile, on Tuesday, the board will consider changes to the water waste ordinance, requiring restaurants to serve water only if patrons ask and hotels to give customers the option to forgo daily linen service.

The district has recommended such measures during the previous two summers, but will seek to make them mandatory. There are no calculations on the amount of water that could be saved, but many businesses already widely follow the recommendations, said Leigh Ann Gessner, conservation outreach coordinator.

During two previous voluntary cutbacks, district customers fell short of reduction targets. However, Gessner said the district has seen significant drops in water production in recent months compared to 2013, including 18 percent and 23 percent in March and April, respectively.

SOQUEL CREEK DISTRICT SURVEY RESULTS

The Soquel Creek Water District commissioned a survey about water supply in March. Here are some highlights of the telephone poll of 301 respondents:

- 68 percent said they understood their water comes from the ground but 48 percent also incorrectly thought it may also come from rivers or creeks.

- 70 percent said inadequate water supplies are a very serious problem in the county, up from 38 percent in 2010.

- 70 percent said seawater desalination is a good or excellent idea for generating new supply, compared to 68 percent in 2010.

- 81 percent said they have cut back on water use as much as they can, while 18 percent disagreed; respondents younger than 40 and renters were more likely to believe they could conserve more.

- 19 percent believe the district's long-term water supply problem could be fixed by simply reducing consumption.

- When told about a mandatory program requires offsetting new water use 200 percent, two-thirds said they would support future development while a quarter want it banned.

Source: Soquel Creek Water District

SOQUEL CREEK WATER DISTRICT BOARD

What: Discussion of updates to the water waste ordinance

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Soquel Creek Water District Board Room, 5180 Soquel Drive, Soquel

Details: soquelcreekwater.org