

Santa Cruz water chief defends desalination plant

Desalination

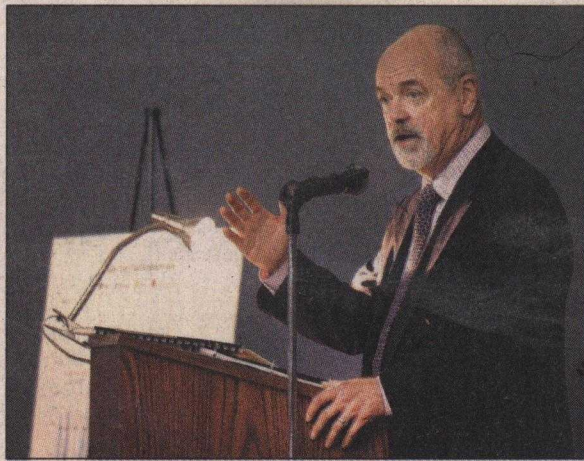
3-19-10

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LIVE OAK — The head of the Santa Cruz Water Department staunchly defended plans to build a desalination plant Thursday, telling a crowd of nearly 200 that there is no other option for surviving a severe drought like the one Santa Cruz experienced in the mid-1970s.

Director Bill Kocher was part of a panel of water experts gathered at Live Oak Elementary School for a public forum sponsored by Transition Santa Cruz to discuss the risks and advantages of turning salty seawater into

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Santa Cruz Water Department Director Bill Kocher speaks about a proposed desalination plant at a community forum at Live Oak Elementary on Thursday.

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drinking water.

Several panelists, including former Huntington Beach Mayor Debbie Cook and Santa Cruz resident Rick Longinotti, attacked desalination as an expensive waste of energy that could be avoided with increasing conservation and trying other water-saving methods such as recycling and capturing rain and other runoff.

“Water restrictions depend on cooperation, and if the water is there for use, most customers are not going to put up with conserving more,” Kocher said. “Conserving more, it’s just not enough.”

Thursday’s forum was sparked by the joint plan between the Santa Cruz Water Department and Soquel Creek Water District to build a desalination plant — estimated to cost more than \$50 million — to help the two water agencies weather dwindling supplies, seawater intrusion and future droughts.

The Santa Cruz Water Department, with 95,000 customers from Davenport to Capitola, would use the plant only in years when rainfall is sparse.

The Soquel Creek Water District, serving 40,000 customers between Capitola and La Selva Beach, plans to operate the facility the rest of the time.

A temporary pilot desalination plant closed in May after operating for a year at UC Santa Cruz’s Long Marine Lab. A final report

on the plant’s efficiency is due next month, Kocher said. Early reports have indicated the pilot plant performed mostly as expected, though not as cheaply as water officials had hoped, he said.

Both water agencies are moving ahead with a permanent desalination plant and hope to have a grip on early design plans this summer, Kocher said.

Desalination critics cited the intensive use of electricity required to operate a desalination plant and potential harm to marine life as reasons alternatives should be considered.

Cook, who served on the state Desalination Task Force, said general water use is too high and the focus should be on changing behaviors rather than “applying a technical fix.”

Relying on desalination to augment water supplies, she said, is “energy down the drain.”

“Clearly we have some energy challenges ahead of us,” she said. “There’s this unstated assumption there will be as much as we want, however, world production has plateaued and we’re just bumping along.”

Larkin Valley resident Erika Gakovich attended the forum to educate herself on both sides of the issue, though she said she’d rather see further reductions in water use than the desalination plant.

“I have a very bad feeling about it,” said Gakovich, an artist and child care provider. “Desal is just another business. I’m pro-conservation. Let’s get rid of lawns.”