

Big decision on tap for county's water project

Water Supply

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Politics a factor

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SANTA CRUZ — Local officials are getting their first glimpse at a study that offers solutions to water woes from Santa Cruz to Aptos.

Santa Cruz needs to boost supply in case of a severe drought, while Mid-County water officials want to reduce overpumping. But each option — a desalination plant, recycling wastewater for North Coast irrigation and diverting

Soquel Creek — faces numerous hurdles. Project pricetags range from \$26 million to \$53 million, and water officials acknowledge that whatever decision is made will be more of a political one than a technical one.

Water decisions typically involve debates about future development and environmental impacts.

"Political decisions have to be made," said Bill Kocher, chief of the Santa Cruz Water Department, which also supplies water to Live Oak. "Whatever is chosen has to be something politicians are willing to fight for."

Among the issues that could prove controversial:

■ Picking a site for a desalination plant, which converts seawater to drinking water. Two to 3 acres are needed. The leading alternatives are on the Westside: the city industrial park and oceanfront property owned by UC Santa Cruz, which has had a sometimes cordial, sometimes strained relationship with the city. A Moss Landing site was ruled out because a 25-mile pipeline would be costly.

■ Routing a pipe to bring ocean water to the plant. Installing pipe on the ocean

floor would cost three times as much as tunneling under city streets.

■ Discharging brine from the plant to the ocean. Regulatory review could take up to two years.

■ Using an abandoned wastewater outfall for saltwater intake. Beach wells were ruled out as neither practical nor cost-effective, but the costs to modify the existing line are not yet known.

■ Negotiating an agreement with the state Parks Department, which owns the water rights at Wilder Ranch State Park, and North Coast farmers who rent the land. This would be a first for the state.

■ Discharging treated water into Soquel Creek, which would require state regulatory approval.

The city, which has 90,000 customers, teamed up with the Soquel Creek Water District, which serves 45,000 people, to explore mutual solutions to their need for more water.

For Kocher, the good news from the study, done for \$100,000 by Carollo Engineers of Walnut Creek, is that consultants found each option technically feasible. Kocher predicted that sharing costs with the Soquel district would

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guarantee water at a cost of \$36 to \$50 a year for the city's residential customers.

Santa Cruz already is planning to spend \$10 million during the next decade to conserve water so rationing can be capped at 25 percent in case of a severe drought.

Officials estimate a drought could leave them short by as much as 280 million gallons in a month of peak use.

The water district, which has customers in Soquel, Capitola and Aptos, is trying to trim water use 10 percent through conservation. That still leaves a shortfall of 600 million to 650 million gallons a year.

Dan Kriege, who chairs the water district board, hopes Santa Cruz officials are serious about working on a desalination project.

"We are the tail wagging the dog," he said.

"If the city doesn't want to do this, it's not something we can do."

If the city rejects a joint project, Kriege said the water district would likely focus on discussions with the Pajaro Valley Water Management

Where to get water

The Soquel Creek Water District and the city of Santa Cruz are considering working together on a project to boost water supplies. The district has been overpumping and the city needs a backup water source in time of drought. Here are the alternatives and the preliminary pricetags.

■ **REGIONAL DESALINATION PLANT, SMALL.** The cost would be \$26 million to \$29 million. Operating costs of about \$2 million a year.

■ **REGIONAL DESALINATION PLANT, MEDIUM.** The cost would be \$37 million to \$41 million. Operating costs of about \$4 million a year.

■ **REGIONAL DESALINATION PLANT, LARGE.** The cost would be \$49 million to \$53 million. Operating costs of about \$6 million a year.

■ **RECYCLING WASTEWATER** for irrigation on the North Coast. The cost would be about \$49 million. Operating costs of about \$400,000 a year.

■ **DIVERTING WATER** from Soquel Creek. The cost would be about \$31 million. Operating costs of \$200,000 to \$400,000 a year. Would benefit Soquel Creek Water District, but not Santa Cruz.

Source: Carollo Engineers

Agency.

The \$31 million Soquel Creek diversion project would not meet all the demand of Soquel Creek customers and it doesn't have any benefits for Santa Cruz.

Kocher said the cost estimates point to the advantages of working together.

"Desalination or reclamation, it doesn't make sense to go it alone," he said.

A city task force consisting of councilmen Mark Primack, Keith Sugar, Ed Porter, water commissioners Howard Whitney, David Reetz and Carson Mueller, and city resident Andy Shiffrin will review the study Monday. The city water commission will discuss it April 1. A final report is due at City Hall by September.

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