

Pipeline proposal near completion

Project would replenish main S.J. aquifer

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Efforts to restore San Joaquin County's overtaxed groundwater aquifer are expected to get a significant financial boost within the next few weeks.

City and state officials are expected to finish proposals soon to help Stockton East Water District finance a six-mile, \$7.4 million pipeline in east Stockton.

Local water planners first proposed building the Peters Pipeline nearly two decades ago when they were working out a massive construction project that allowed SEWD to put a straw in the Stanislaus River. But a mix of local water politics and a lack of money stalled the project until recently.

The pipeline, when constructed, will go a long way to help water officials put water back into the county's main groundwater aquifer, a sort of underground reservoir that has been seriously depleted. Currently, water is extracted from the aquifer faster than it can be replenished. As a result of the overdraft, underground saltwater is intruding slowly into the aquifer from the Delta, threatening the county's important source of water.

SEWD and other water agencies recently have stepped up efforts to get water back into the aquifer in order to push back the saltwater. Those recharge efforts involve flooding land and allowing water to percolate into the ground.

Yet those percolation efforts have been constrained by the fact that there is no way to get river water to many of the farm fields east of Stockton.

The Peters Pipeline, however, will be able to bring in that river water, said Kevin Kauffman, SEWD's general manager.

The pipeline will help the aquifer in two important ways. First, more than 2,600 acres of farmland will be able to use river water, decreasing reliance on the aquifer. Secondly, the pipeline will carry extra water to fields where farmers have agreed to participate in the percolation project.

Half of the pipeline's cost is expected to come from a voter-approved bond measure passed in 2000. The state Department of Water Resources is just days away from signing off on the grants, said Steve Verigin, DWR's acting chief deputy director.

After this round of grants, the Proposition 13 account will be out of money for new projects, Verigin said.

The other half of the costs will come from the urban water agencies that rely on water from SEWD. That includes Stockton.

Stockton City Council members will have to approve any decision to lend the needed \$3.4 million to start the project. That could happen within a few weeks.

The pipeline would benefit Stockton in several ways, said Mark Madison, municipal utilities director.

Right now, SEWD only has one pipeline that brings water to the water-treatment plant. Having a parallel pipeline would increase reliability, Madison said.

"It also helps us move forward with banking groundwater, which is good for the whole area," Madison said.

Once money for the project is secured, construction on the underground, 60-inch pipeline could begin as soon as spring 2005, Kauffman said.

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