

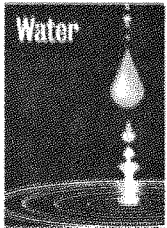
Dam will store water
for Salinas Valley farmers

Board OKs new diversion facility

By **KEVIN HOWE**
Herald Staff Writer

Purchase of land for the Salinas River Diversion Facility was approved 3-0 Tuesday by the Board of Supervisors.

The 5.6-acre parcel straddles the Salinas River and adjoins the Marina landfill owned by the Monterey Regional Waste Management District.



The county has agreed to buy the parcel from the waste management district for \$96,000.

The rubber dam, officially known as the Salinas River Diversion Facility, is designed to store water down river for Salinas Valley farmers to use for irrigation during dry periods when underground supplies are not replenished naturally. Such use will reduce pumping from the already overdrafted water supply.

The aquifer that supplies water to the valley is already experiencing seawater intrusion as a result of users taking more water out than is being put back in.

The dam, about 10 feet high,

Dam

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would create a pond holding about 40 acre-feet of water during dry periods. During winter, the dam would be lowered so the river could flow to Monterey Bay, allowing steelhead to make their way to spawning grounds in the Arroyo Seco River.

The purchase agreement holds the waste management district not responsible for the effects of gases or other materials that might emanate from its landfill into the holding pond created by the dam. The agreement also gives the district first right of refusal if the

county decides to sell the land.

In 2003, owners of 85 percent of assessed property values in the Salinas Valley agreed to tax themselves to help pay for the construction of the rubber dam on the Salinas River, one of two major components included in the Salinas Valley Water Project.

The valley water project will widen the spillway at the Nacimiento Dam to prolong releases of water into the river during dry summer months.

Total cost of the projects is estimated at \$18.8 million.

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FISHERY AGENCY OKS USE OF RUBBER DAM

Report says project won't jeopardize steelhead runs

By LARRY PARSONS

Monterey County Herald

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Monterey County water officials, after five years, have received a key scientific green light for the long-planned Salinas Valley Water Project.

The biological opinion issued this month by the National Marine Fisheries Service says a removable rubber dam used seasonally on the Salinas River won't jeopardize migratory runs of endangered steelhead.

"That's a significant conclusion," said Bill Hearn, team supervisor in Santa Rosa for the federal fisheries agency.

The steelhead report, which will be used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in deciding project permits, represents a critical hurdle for the water project.

"This is exceedingly good news," said Stephen Collins, vice chairman of the county Water Resources Agency board of directors.

"Once you have that ... all the other permits fall in succession."

Agency manager Curtis Weeks said another report from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is reviewing the project's impact on endangered snowy plovers, should be released shortly.

"They've indicated there is nothing of major concern," he said.

Hearn said the lengthy fishery review should make the river more steelhead friendly in the long run because of changes in springtime water releases from Lake Nacimiento the county agreed to make.

Until now, Hearn said, the agency's reservoirs — lakes San Antonio and Nacimiento — have been operated to allow the river to run dry by April, in typical years, near Spreckels.

That pattern cuts severely into the downstream migration period for juvenile steelhead, when young fish head back to the ocean, and is a significant factor for damage to the river's steelhead population, he said.

"The Water Resources Agency agreed to modify the dam operations to provide more flow during the spring," Hearn said. "That's a significant outcome of this consultation."

Weeks said: "We'll operate the reservoirs to enhance the fishery. It's a real benefit."

The water project is intended to halt saltwater intrusion at Salinas Valley's north end by reducing the need for groundwater areas where wells have been contaminated by seawater sucked in by overpumping.

The inflatable rubber dam on the river near Marina will be used to store water and divert it during dry periods to a delivery system already used to convey recycled wastewater to Castroville-area farm fields.

"This will be one of the most beneficial water projects the Salinas Valley has ever seen," said county Supervisor Lou Calcagno, whose district includes the Castroville area. "If it works successfully, it will guarantee us a long-term water supply."

The rubber dam should pose no threat to migrating steelhead because it will have a fish ladder, Hearn said. The county water agency committed to monitor steelhead populations in the Nacimiento and Arroyo Seco watersheds for 10 years and to install an underwater camera on the fish ladder, Hearn said.

The five-year review of the Salinas Valley Water Project afforded the first comprehensive look at steelhead-related issues on the river since the fish was declared an endangered species in 1997, Hearn said. That status required consultation with federal fisheries officials.

"It's the first consultation we have had on the regulation of flows in the Salinas River," Hearn said.

The project, which includes modification to the spillway of Nacimiento Dam, has been in the works for years. Salinas Valley property owners voted in 2003 to finance it with property assessments.

In June, county supervisors approved an annual increase in the assessments despite the project's long delays. Weeks said long-awaited construction should start spring 2008.

Because of the long time it has taken to get the project started, the original estimated cost of about \$19 million jumped to \$38 million.

"It's been several years, but we always have known it was coming," Collins said.

Calcagno said, "When all is said and done, it was approved with flying colors."

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