

# Regional water project to be pursued despite county officials' reservations

By KELLY NIX

THE UC Santa Cruz economist leading a regional project that aims to solve the Monterey Peninsula's water supply problems has decided to move ahead with work on the plan despite opposition from a county supervisor and a county agency's reluctance to support it.

Steve Kasower, the UCSC senior research economist who heads Water for Monterey County, had hoped to forge a contract with the Monterey County Water Resources Agency to manage the money for studying the plan.

But MCWRA directors, skeptical of the plan — which would provide as much as 29,000 acre-feet of water to the Peninsula and other areas of the county — did not commit last week to supporting it. "I don't think we have any more time to waste," Kasower said.

For more than a year, WMC has held monthly meetings to discuss the plan. But because there was no contract in place with the county to oversee the funds, this month's meeting had to be canceled, Kasower said.

So Kasower decided to enter into individual contracts with California American Water Co. and the Marina Coast Water District, which have agreed to share the roughly \$12,000 it costs each month for WMC to keep going. On Sept. 16, the Castroville Community Services District will decide if it also wants to support the WMC plan.

"It's not impossible to get [the project] going without the county," Kasower said.

The group was formed last year, and until August, its expenses were paid by the California Public Utilities Commission. But with the CPUC's support now ended, a new funding source had to be found.

The regional plan, launched in 2007, would involve several components, including desalination of water from the

Marina sewage treatment plant, from storm runoff and from near-coastal aquifers at the mouth of the Salinas Valley. The desal plant could be powered with electricity generated by capturing methane gas from the Marina landfill.

Kasower is a economist with UCSC's Center for Integrated Water Research, which focuses on water policy, economics and communications.

While MCWRA directors agreed at a special meeting Sept. 3 to learn more about the regional water plan, they were also skeptical of it — especially the idea that some of the treated water would come from beneath the Salinas River.

"The Salinas Valley belongs to us," said board chair Richard Morgantini early in the meeting. "The water is ours."

Director Richard Ortiz said the water problems of the Salinas Valley need to be taken care of first before the agency helps the Peninsula with its water issues.

Morgantini also questioned whether the MCWRA had the resources to support the project and said the agency's next step should be finding ways to supply more water to North Monterey County.

Last week, dairy farmer and Monterey County Supervisor Lou Calcagno, whose district includes North Monterey County, heavily criticized the WMC plan, telling The Pine Cone he believed the project was a threat to the Salinas Valley's water supply.

And MCWRA General Manager Curtis Weeks said the discussion of various water projects, including the WMC plan and California American Water Co.'s proposed desal plant in Moss Landing, has created "tension."

Though discussion about the WMC proposal has been going on for more than one year, directors — who haven't attended WMC monthly meetings — said they felt they were caught off guard by the proposal.

"It's been thrown at us fast," Morgantini said. "We just got this presentation a month ago. We are saying, 'give us time.'"

Directors agreed to attend a series of workshops to find out more about the regional water plan.