

AVEK approves water plan; more agencies to vote

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PALMDALE - Another of the 11 lead agencies has given a thumbs-up to the Antelope Valley Integrated Regional Water Management Plan - a document that describes projects needed to ensure a reliable water supply for Valley residents and businesses now and in the future.

All seven members of the Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency voted in favor of the regional water plan during a board meeting Tuesday night. Lancaster City Council and Los Angeles County Waterworks District 40 already had approved the plan, which requires the OK from all 11 entities in order to compete for up to \$25 million in state grants for projects like flood management and habitat restoration as well as water conservation measures and water banking plans.

AVEK directors Neal Weisenberger and Dave Rizzo, who attended brainstorming sessions about the water plan for roughly a year, convinced their board colleagues to approve the plan.

"We should support it," Weisenberger said. "It's a great document that shows the water issues in the Valley."

"I have been involved with the IRWMP from its inception," Rizzo said. As a current member of the leadership team, he added, "I feel that the adoption of this plan can only benefit the Antelope Valley on a comprehensive level."

Though more than 50 agencies at city, county and state levels participated in a series of stakeholder workshops geared toward developing projects that fit the criteria for state funding, only 11 agencies took the lead in signing a memorandum of understanding that committed them to the water plan. The other agencies that must say "yes" include the Antelope Valley State Water Contractors Association, Littlerock Creek Irrigation District, Rosamond Community Services District, Quartz Hill Water District, Palmdale Water District, the Palmdale City Council, County Sanitation District 14 and County Sanitation District 20.

Although Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford has been quoted as saying he won't approve the plan unless certain projects are withdrawn - projects he referred to as "toilet-to-tap" - consultants said without approval from all 11 agencies, the state will deny the Valley any grant funds.

As of Dec. 30, the lead agencies paid a total of \$613,332 to cover consultants' fees for preparation of the plan and the money required for Step 1 and Step 2 of the state grant application process, said Lauren Everett, an environmental scientist with Kennedy/Jenks Consultants, the Ventura-based firm that has coordinated this project. That money will not be refunded if the lead agencies do not reach a consensus. The deadline for agencies to adopt the plan is Jan. 28, she said.

The AV State Water Contractors Association will vote on the plan next week, said Leo Thibault, one of that group's board members.

Quartz Hill Water District will call a special meeting in two weeks to meet the deadline, said General Manager Chad Reed. He couldn't speculate about the board's vote, but he said, "Our board has been very supportive of this the entire time."

Carolyn Bones, the office manager for Littlerock Creek Irrigation District, said that board will vote Wednesday, Jan. 16. "It's on the agenda. I believe, from what I've heard, they're supportive."

Rosamond Community Services District had the issue on the agenda for its Wednesday meeting, said General Manager Bob Neufeld. He wasn't certain how the board would vote, but he said, "In general, the comments I've heard from the Rosamond board are very supportive."

Boards for County Sanitation Districts 14 and 20 will vote Jan. 23, said Ray Tremblay, head of the Monitoring Section of the Sanitation Districts Technical Services Department in Whittier. Neufeld disputed the toilet-to-tap claims. "It's a perception more than a reality," he said. "Everything you're drinking today is recycled water. We've been doing that for a million years - every drop of water. It's just a natural cycle.

"It really is a matter of education," Neufeld said. "Science has proven that you can take wastewater and treat it to standards higher than the quality of most drinking water in the United States."

Because the population of California continues to grow, Neufeld said, "we need to find ways to make beneficial use of every drop of water." But, he added, "we need the proper safeguards in place to protect health and safety."

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