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Salinas Valley water project timeline released

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In exchange for dropping a challenge to a key Salinas Valley water right, state regulators have issued a set of requirements the Monterey County Water Resources Agency must meet in order to stay in regulators' good graces.

The standoff between the county and the state began just before last Thanksgiving when the state Water Board said it planned to revoke Permit No. 11043, claiming that water projects the county agreed to build when the original right was granted in 1957 have never been built. Two projects were named in particular: the East Side and Castroville canals.

According to documents on file with the state Water Board, "the Notice of Proposed Revocation alleges that MCWRA has not prosecuted construction work with due diligence, completed construction work, or applied water to beneficial use as contemplated by Permit 11043 and in accordance with the Water Code." Regulators had granted five prior extensions.

In response, the county Water Agency convened a committee, called the Regional Advisory Committee (RAC), that comprises a broad swath of of stakeholders in Salinas Valley water — growers, other water agencies and agricultural advocates. The original goal was to brainstorm defenses in preparation for a hearing with the Water Board that was to be held on Aug. 14. But a settlement was reached before then — conditionally.

At an RAC meeting Thursday, Robert Johnson, assistant general manager for the county Water Resources Agency, outlined the conditions that involve a reduced amount of water, limits on diverting water from the Salinas River, and a set of deadlines the Water Board calls "milestones."

The original permit 11043 gave the water agency 168,000 acre-feet per year to be used to battle seawater intrusion. That has now been reduced to 135,000 acre-feet. An acre foot of water would cover one acre of land to a depth of one foot, or about 326,000 gallons.

Secondly, the state created a table measured in cubic feet per second that governs the amount of water that can be diverted from the river for any water project. The table varies depending on the month, and only considers the "natural flow" of the river. In other words, the water agency cannot count water it releases from either Nacimiento or San Antonio reservoirs.

For example, in January (the height of the rainy season), the agency can divert water only if the natural flow is above 3.30 cfs. But in August when the valley's water tables are highly depleted because of a season of irrigation, the agency can divert water only if the flow is above 20.97 cfs, severely restricting diversions.

Lastly, the Water Board's "milestones" begin with an Oct. 6 deadline to file another extension enabling the county Water Agency to prepare plans for project. By July of next year, the agency and committee must file descriptions of specific projects that will use the 11043 water to battle seawater intrusion. By July 2015 the Water Agency must have completed a draft report outlining any environmental concerns and how they will be alleviated.

The next summer after that it must have a plan outlining how the Water Agency plans to pay for the project or projects, followed by a July 2017 deadline to complete the final environmental study. Applications to all the involved regulatory agencies must be filed by July 2018, and after that construction can begin on the projects, which must be completed by 2026.

"It's a pretty aggressive schedule," Johnson told the committee on Thursday.

The settlement came shortly after the Monterey County Board of Supervisors voted to provide support — including $1 million a year for three years — to fight the water right revocation.

Two projects in particular were cited by the state Water Board as never being completed: the East Side and Castroville canals. The concept behind both were to provide growers with water so they would not overdraft wells, the primary cause of seawater intrusion.

The Castroville area is one of the hardest hit areas in the seawater's determined march toward prime agriculture areas in the valley.

But a different project, the Castroville Seawater Intrusion Project, diverted water from the Salinas River to be mixed with treated effluent in Marina — the "Purple Pipe" — that has provided growers with irrigation water so they can depend less on pumping water out of underground aquifers.

That project is achieving essentially the same goal as the Water Board's Castroville Canal project.

On Thursday, Johnson unveiled a list of 34 projects from a 1991 study — of which roughly 10 would be viable today.

The task of the Regional Advisory Committee now will be to get down into the weeds of each of these and select the most beneficial water projects that can be completed in accordance with the Water Board's milestones.

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