

Drought pushes back controversial water project

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The drought has dealt a serious blow to a controversial desert water banking/solar project that had looked like it was on a fast track for approval.

Environmental documents for the so-called Fremont Valley Preservation Project, which would pump more than 114,000 acre-feet of native groundwater a year from beneath the Mojave desert, just didn't add up considering the state's dire water straits, Kern County Planning Director Lorelei Oviatt concluded.

Despite being approved late last month by the county Planning Commission, Oviatt will tell the Board of Supervisors on Feb. 25 that the environmental impact report (EIR) isn't up to snuff and must be sent back to planning staff.

"Given the state's allocation this year was zero water, it calls into question the sufficiency of the project," Oviatt said.

The project's proponent, AquaHelio Resources LLC, intends to revise its EIR and go forward, according to Dave Morton, vice president of operations for A-C Electric Co., which is working with AquaHelio.

"New circumstances, so we revise and resubmit," he wrote in an email.

The solar part of the project would cover nearly 5,000 acres and generate 1,000 megawatts.

There are two components to the water side of the project: water banking and groundwater extraction and sales.

AquaHelio had proposed tying into the Los Angeles Aqueduct in order to bank up to 200,000 acre-feet of water per year.

Though the aqueduct is owned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the water could have come from a number of state water contractors, Oviatt said.

"People had an emotional attachment thinking it was the aqueduct so it must be LADWP's water, but that's not the case," she said. "The water code says the LA aqueduct is available to move any water."

Once the State Water Project announced it would deliver zero percent of water allocations this year, Oviatt said, she went back and dug deeper in to the EIR.

"It brought up fundamental questions for me that I couldn't answer," she said, referring to the link between the banking part of the project and the extraction side.

Water banks typically require depositors leave 10 percent of the water they store in the bank.

AquaHelio's EIR took that 10 percent into account when it analysed the basin's recovery rate, Oviatt explained. (Recovery is how quickly an aquifer fills from rain, streams, etc.).

And that recovery rate was used to determine how much groundwater Aqua-Helio could safely pump out each year and sell to other users in the area.

The State Water Project's unreliability, however, drew into question whether that 10 percent could reasonably be used as part of the basin's recovery.

So Oviatt pulled the plug on the entire project, including the solar portion.

That puts AquaHelio back at square one.

"Oh! I could do a dance," said an ecstatic Dawn Martin, who lives a stone's throw from the proposed solar part of the project. "I was prepared to say OK to the solar, but not the water."

Mike Powell, general manager of the Rand Water District, which has about 1,000 residents who rely on the Fremont Valley aquifer for their drinking water, was more circumspect.

"It makes me apprehensive," he said. "Not just this project, but the drought in general."

He worried that the aquifer is still a target, whether by AquaHelio or some other entity looking for water in a desperately dry year.