

Experts consider plans for Ventura Wastewater

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Special to The Star

Wednesday, October 31, 2012

Fourteen months ago, Ventura settled a lawsuit about its use of treated wastewater in the Santa Clara River estuary, and Wednesday stakeholders got their first glimpse of the dozen or so ways the city could comply.

The options include greatly expanding wetlands, building upstream water treatment plants and treating wastewater with reverse osmosis and advanced oxidation to allow it to be recycled. Costs range from undefined but low figures for wetlands expansion to a high of about \$150 million for a new plant upstream along the river that could offer a new source of drinking water.

The lawsuit, filed under the Clean Water Act, said high levels of pollutants such as nitrates and ammonia had damaged the estuary habitat, endangering the health of the shallow waters at the mouth of the river near McGrath State Beach. The city agreed to spend up to \$55 million in the next 10 years to redirect and reuse, if possible, the millions of gallons of treated wastewater that flows daily from a city facility near Ventura Harbor into the river estuary.

Endangered species such as the tidewater goby and the steelhead trout live in these waters.

As part of the settlement, the city agreed to work on a new water discharge plan with stakeholders, including officials from McGrath and the state Regional Water Quality Control Board, neighboring cities, such as Oxnard, and environmental groups, such as the Wishtoyo Foundation and its Ventura Coastkeepers, which filed the lawsuit.

About 75 representatives from these agencies and many others crowded into a hearing room in City Hall on Wednesday to hear an environmental engineering firm present plans to solve the wastewater problem. The discussion was based on the results from three studies costing a total of \$1.2 million, which were compiled in a 332-page document released this year.

Shana Epstein, general manager of the city's Ventura Water agency, said treating the wastewater could allow the city to reuse or resell the water and defray the cost of new installations.

"If we stop looking at it as wastewater and start looking at it as a viable resource, we can see different price points, and different components of what rates will pay for its treatment," she said.

The discussion was complicated by the fact that Ventura's permit to discharge the wastewater into the estuary is governed by the water quality board. That permit will expire next year. The board will reissue a new permit only if the city can show the

release of the wastewater is an "enhancement" of the estuary.

Brandi Outwin-Beals, a senior engineer, said the enhancement of the estuary by the daily release of the city's 9 million gallons of treated wastewater has not been proved. A hydrological study this year found that the estuary, which is partially fed by groundwater, would not fully disappear even if the city released no wastewater, but that may not be enough to satisfy the board.

"One of the issues which arose the last time the permit was considered five years ago was McGrath State Beach, which was concerned that as the water level (in the estuary) rises, campground areas can be flooded," she said. "But then you have other agencies, such as Fish and Game, which wanted the level of the estuary to rise for the sake of the wildlife such as steelhead."

After considering the comments, the engineering consultants plan to return with a more developed set of alternatives for public discussion in February.

Epstein said the city wants to have consensus on a solution by 2015. Ventura plans to offer more public outreach throughout the process as part of the settlement.

"By the end of 2015, we will have completed the Phase 2 studies, which is what we're looking at now, and the Phase 3 studies, and we hope to have arrived at a consensus on a decision," she said. "If we can do it sooner, that would be awesome."



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