

Farmers talk about financing delivery pipes

Nascent discussions focus on interest in the agricultural community

By JEANINE GORE
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Quietly, away from the bright lights and boardroom microphones of Sewer Authority Mid-coastside, other talks about recycled water are unfolding.

Despite their furtive nature, they have as much bearing on the recycling project as the pipes and filtration equipment itself.

These plans involve talks with farmers and nursery interests: collectively, the agricultural end users. Without interest from them, the plan to relieve parched Pilarcitos Creek, is merely a pipe dream.

The federal government will not provide grant funding to reclaimed water projects unless it has assurance that there are sufficient end-users in place. As executive director of the San Mateo County Farm Bureau, Jack Olsen is trying to determine just that.

Farmers and other recycled water customers have floated the idea of forming an irrigation district to, among other things, pay for pipeline to deliver the water from the sewer plant to area growers. Conceivably, the irrigation district could also cover storage costs.

At this point it's only an idea. But it could prove to be an integral part in bringing recycled water to the Coastside.

Sewer Authority Mid-coastside is considering building a \$5 million recycled water facility. The price is kept relatively low because it does not include storage costs or the many additional hundreds of thousands of dollars needed to transport that water to customers.

SAM is hoping the end-users — possibly through creation of

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an irrigation assessment district— will cover those costs.

Olsen is doing some "reconnaissance gathering," as he put it. Mostly, he's trying to find out what various growers pay to produce their water. Down the road, he can contrast those costs against proposed recycled water rates and gain a better sense of whether "a desire to go forward" exists among the farm community.

"We've been told that the cost of pumping an acre foot could be as low as \$80 to \$90," he said, reciting estimates from PG&E. "We're trying to get to the bottom of what the actual costs are."

The Farm Bureau has not given Olsen any formal direction on the issue. He is proceeding with efforts to determine whether the agricultural community is interested in financing recycled water infrastructure and whether the reclaimed water could legally be sent to the biggest agricultural users without stepping on the toes of Coastside County Water District by breaking the law of duplication of service.

"There have been some discussions but nothing can go forward because there are just too many questions out there that need to be answered," he said.