

The San Diego Union-Tribune.

\$300 million water plan would join reservoirs

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COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

March 10, 2006

In the ongoing quest for more water, the city of San Diego and a Chula Vista-based district have joined forces to push a \$300 million pipeline network that would connect isolated reservoirs and provide emergency water storage for 200,000 households a year.

The proposal received a boost this week when Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine, secured unanimous support in the House of Representatives for a \$3 million grant to study whether the ambitious project is workable. The funding measure, HR 1190, now moves to the Senate.

Under the legislation, the federal Bureau of Reclamation would review the plan to connect San Vicente, El Capitan, Loveland and Murray reservoirs, all in San Diego County. The four reservoirs provide water to 1.5 million residents of San Diego, National City, Bonita and Chula Vista.

“Limited water supplies, coupled with burgeoning population growth, warrant the need for discovering new and reliable water sources,” Hunter said in pleading his case to a House committee.

If the project proceeds, funding options include state and federal grants and user water rates.

“The primary barrier to doing this would be the money,” said Rick Alexander, director of environmental services for the Sweetwater Authority in Chula Vista. Water officials want to capture more water in wet years and store it in Loveland and El Capitan reservoirs, which have excess capacity.

They estimate that 100,000 acre feet was lost this rainy season because reservoirs could not be filled to capacity.

El Capitan, which is east of Santee, is only a quarter full despite a soggy winter. El Capitan has reached its 112,000 acre-foot capacity only 11 times in the past 68 years, according to water officials.

Loveland, which lies in the foothills leading into the Cuyamaca Mountains 21 miles east of San Diego Bay, is slightly less than half full. It has been filled to capacity – 26,000 acre feet – just 12 times in 57 years.

An acre foot is nearly 326,000 gallons, or enough to serve two average households for a year.

Murray Reservoir, near La Mesa, is the smallest piece of the project with just 4,800 acre feet of capacity. However, it is the site of the Alvarado Water Treatment Plant, and is a key distribution point to city of San Diego customers.

San Vicente, the fourth reservoir with a 90,230 acre-foot capacity, is mostly full and would be a delivery hub. Separate plans are in the works to enlarge San Vicente and add another pipeline to keep it full by 2009.

The four reservoirs would be connected so that water can be moved around depending on the season and local needs, under the new proposal jointly advanced by the city of San Diego and the Sweetwater Authority. Officials say the project has significant advantages and few drawbacks.

“You don't have the problems of impacts on private property. You don't have the environmental impacts – these reservoirs are already in place,” Alexander said.

Property owners also are not likely to be affected because existing public rights of way and tunnels will be used to move water between reservoirs, he said.

Supplies also could continue to flow even if an earthquake or other disaster severed one of the main water pipelines, he said.

Architects of the plan have not estimated the number of miles of pipeline necessary because potential routes have not been finalized.