

Imperial Valley canal-lining project moves forward

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By: GIG CONAUGHTON - Staff Writer

SAN DIEGO ----- A long-discussed canal-lining project that is expected to deliver enough water to San Diego County residents to sustain more than 112,000 households for the next 110 years moved a step closer to reality Thursday.

San Diego County Water Authority officials approved general contract terms Thursday to build a 23-mile, concrete-lined stretch of the 82-mile All-American Canal in Imperial Valley.

Water Authority officials have estimated it would cost about \$237 million to build the canal. However, through a complicated set of agreements, the Water Authority has been given \$136 million by the state to offset the project's cost. Water officials said they won't know exact costs until companies begin bidding to build it.

"This is going to bring us a reliable water supply for 110 years, and make up about 8 percent of our total water supply by just a couple of years from now (2008)," said Gordon Hess, the Water Authority's director of imported water.

The Water Authority supplies nearly all the water that San Diego County residents use.

The canal-lining project ---- which has been talked about for many years ---- is part of a complex series of agreements among San Diego County, Imperial Valley and federal officials to conserve Colorado River water that is now seeping into the earthen beds of the Imperial Valley canal and transfer it to San Diego County.

As part of the agreement, five San Luis Rey American Indian tribes in San Diego County will also get a share of the lining-project's water, roughly 11,500 acre-feet a year ---- enough to sustain 23,000 households.

Dan Hentschke, the Water Authority's top lawyer, meanwhile, said that lawsuits seeking to stop the project are still working their way through federal courts, and no action was expected on them for several months.

An unusual coalition of Mexican business leaders and Californian environmental groups sued the federal government in July to stop the All-American canal project. They argued that the water now percolating into the desert canal beds turns up in wetlands and in groundwater supplies in Mexico. They said lining the canal could kill off endangered species living in the wetlands and could hurt farming in Mexicali.

The Water Authority agreed to assume responsibility for lining the All-American Canal ---- and a portion of the nearby Coachella Canal ---- two years ago as part of its historic deal to buy billions of gallons of water from Imperial Valley farmers.

Water officials in Imperial Valley who will oversee building the project approved the contract terms Tuesday.

Officials from the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which owns the canal, are expected to approve the deal today.

Completing the agreements could allow companies to start bidding to build the project next month, with construction likely to begin by next year, and completion by December 2008.

"We're very excited and looking forward to building the project," said Halla Razak, the Water Authority's Colorado River program manager.

The Water Authority previously reached agreements with Coachella Valley water officials. A \$71 million project to line a 33-mile portion of the Coachella Canal began in November 2004 and is expected to be completed by 2007. The state has given the Water Authority \$84 million for that project, and the San Luis Rey Indians would get an allocation from that project as well.

The All-American Canal runs from 20 miles northeast of Yuma, Ariz., down along the U.S.-Mexico border into Imperial County east of San Diego, delivering water to the desert from the Colorado River.

The Coachella Canal is a branch of the All-American Canal that delivers water to communities including Palm Springs, Palm Desert and Indian Wells, north of the

Salton Sea.

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