

Oasis or mirage? Company wants to tap Mojave water

Noaki Schwartz and Garance Burke, Associated Press, 11-7-11

CADIZ, Calif. -- Off historic Route 66 in the heart of the California desert the barren landscape of dry scrub and rock abruptly gives way to an oasis of tall green trees heavy with lemons and grape vines awaiting next month's harvest.

Some believe this lush farm in the unlikelyst of places also sits atop a partial solution to Southern California's water woes.

By tapping into an aquifer the size of Rhode Island under the 35,000-acre Cadiz ranch, proponents say they can supply 400,000 people with drinking water in only a few years.

If the plan sounds familiar, it is. A decade ago, Los Angeles' Metropolitan Water District narrowly rejected it when it faced widespread environmental opposition. A scaled back version has resurfaced with a greener pitch, momentum from five water agencies and what the company claims is better science to win over skeptics.

"Do we need additional water supplies? Yes. Do we need groundwater storage? Yes," said Winston Hickox, a Cadiz Inc. board member who headed the California Environmental Protection Agency. "The question is 'OK, environmental community, what are your remaining concerns?' I don't know."

But conservationists including the Sierra Club remain worried. Critics say the company has misrepresented the size of the aquifer and that mining it could harm the threatened desert tortoise, bighorn sheep, as well as the nearby Mojave National

Preserve which has some of the densest and oldest Joshua tree forests in the world. Concerns over rare desert species were also echoed by state Department of Fish and Game biologists in March.

Conservationists also worry tampering with an aquifer in a place where water is so scarce could cause dust storms.

"There's a lot of unknowns here but we think this project has the potential to adversely affect air quality, draw down water resources and alter the flow of groundwater beneath the Mojave Preserve," said Seth Shteir with the National Parks and

Conservation Association, which plans to scrutinize an environmental review of the project, expected to be released this month.

Groundwater has long played a part in the West's age-old water wars, which are increasingly being waged underground. These large unseen reserves of underground water nourish a place that would appear to most observers as dead.

California has few regulations when it comes to groundwater pumping, according to Carolyn Remick, who heads the Berkeley Water Center at the University of California. Consequently it is often weaker local agencies that largely oversee such extraction, leading to a raft of problems ranging from groundwater contamination to over-pumping and ground sinking.

Last year a conservation group sued the state water board in an effort to force the agency to regulate groundwater pumping that has depleted Northern California's Scott River, threatening salmon populations. In

arid Kern County, north of the Mojave

Preserve, a local water utility filed suit against wealthy farming interests claiming their enormous withdrawals of water lowered the water table and caused service disruptions.

Cadiz officials say they are aware of the concerns and promise an extensive monitoring system. The water in question begins in springs high atop desert mountains and travels under the Cadiz ranch before it resurfaces in dusty lake beds dozens of miles away where it evaporates.

The plan could cost as much as \$225 million to sink 34 wells into the desert and build a 44-mile pipeline along a railroad right-of-way that intersects with the Colorado River Aqueduct.

In dry years, water would be pumped to burgeoning communities in Southern California. During years with above-average rainfall, Colorado River water could be pumped to the aquifer for storage. Proponents say the water would offer a much-needed alternative to boost supplies in a region hard hit with water cutbacks during the state's recent three-year drought.

For years the project was led by a colorful British businessman, Los Angeles-based Cadiz founder Keith Brackpool, who has since taken a more behind-the-scenes role. Brackpool, who also heads the California Racing Board, has deep political connections, contributing to past gubernatorial candidates, serving as a water consultant to former Gov. Gray Davis and whose company once employed Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa as a consultant.

Brackpool, however, became something of a distraction when it was revealed by the Los Angeles Times that years earlier he admitted in a British court to having dealt in securities without a license and that his expertise before becoming the governor's water consultant was overseeing a food company. His company reports having \$145 million in assets, but generated revenue of just \$1 million last year. It also is being investigated by shareholders unhappy with recent executive bonuses.

Brackpool, through a company spokesman, refused repeated requests for an interview with The Associated Press. Cadiz ranch is the company's only water project.

The Cadiz proposal was rejected in early 2000 by the Metropolitan Water District in part after conservationists raised concerns over possible environmental damage. A scaled-back version resurfaced in 2008 with a new spokesman, Scott Slater, a new greener pitch that they were conserving water that would otherwise evaporate and new studies that showed how much water they could safely pump.

"We're not taking water from anyone," Slater said. "It sincerely is depriving only the atmosphere of water that would actually evaporate."

Former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has called the proposal "a path-breaking, new, sustainable groundwater conservation and storage project." But Sen. Dianne Feinstein called it a "serious threat to the desert" in a 2008 letter to the Department of the

Interior, potentially depleting water supplies which plants and wildlife rely upon for survival

Since 2010, the Santa Margarita Water District, Three Valleys Water District, Golden State Water Company, Suburban Water Systems and Jurupa Community Services District entered into agreements with Cadiz to receive water. These agencies supply water to parts of Los Angeles County, Orange County, Riverside County and eastern San Gabriel Valley.

The company has invested \$7 million in hiring top-flight consultants to study the science behind the project and in drilling wells.

Cadiz also put together a panel of experts who reviewed the project and recently deemed it safe.

A comprehensive environmental report is expected to be released this month and if the project clears all required permits, the districts hope to get water within two years.

And if voters approve a \$11 billion water bond measure intended to rebuild California's crumbling water system and fund new dams, water districts may apply for public funds available for new infrastructure to save up the precious resource for dry years.

Schwarzenegger signed the bond bill in 2009, but it won't become law unless voters approve it a year from now next November.

John Schatz, Santa Margarita's general manager, calls the new vision a "conservation project," but he acknowledged potential hurdles in selling the greener pitch.

"We don't have any illusions that there may be some issues with environmental groups and what's happened in the past," he said.