

Press Release

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FPUD bill to use local water passes House

FALLBROOK – Sixty-plus years after the Fallbrook Public Utility District began trying to tap into local water in the Santa Margarita River, and then running into legal hurdles preventing the district from using the river water, it looks like the long-fought battle may finally be ending. The river project took a giant leap forward last week when the U.S. Senate passed a bill authorizing it.

The bill, H.R. 29, passed through the House of Representatives unanimously last year. Now this year, it must be signed by President Obama before it can take effect.

If that happens, it will authorize the federal Bureau of Reclamation to build the river project, allowing FPUD to gain access to cheaper, more reliable local water in the Santa Margarita River, solving some 60-years of litigation over water rights in the river. The project, termed the “conjunctive-use” project, would provide about 40 percent of the district’s total supply of water, and 100 percent of Camp Pendleton’s, its partner in the project.

With the daunting challenge of finding more water in this drought-stricken region, this project is especially important as it will make a hefty chunk of the imported water FPUD currently purchases available to other parts of the county. Officials say the construction on the river project is slated to begin in late 2010.

Originally introduced by U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Temecula, the bill would allow the federal government to give FPUD a low-interest loan to finance the \$60-million conjunctive-use project. On the money side, a separate bill will be needed to appropriate the \$60 million. Later this year, FPUD staff and the board of directors will be working with Issa for a bill to gain appropriation.

"This project will help residents of Fallbrook and Camp Pendleton," said Issa. "Utilizing the resources that we have here in San Diego County will reduce our dependence on importing water."

Here's how it would work: the project would take surface water from the river in the winter when there is a surplus and store it underground for use in drier months. Once signed by the president, the Bureau of Reclamation would build a state-of-the-art nano-filtration treatment plant on Camp Pendleton and the water would be piped back to Fallbrook as needed.

This would be an enormous benefit to the district with the cost of imported water expected to double over the next decade or two. The project is expected to result in lower water rates for FPUD customers

Other benefits include the fact that the water would be higher quality than water from the Colorado River because the water would be treated with a nano-filtration system.

"This is going to provide cheaper, more reliable, cleaner water for Fallbrook, and it is a long time coming," said Keith Lewinger, FPUD general manager. "I'm optimistic it's really going to come to fruition for Fallbrook after all these years."

Engineering, economic and environmental feasibility studies for the project are currently underway and are targeted for completion in fall 2009.