

EBMUD BACKS OFF PARDEE EXPANSION

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SAN ANDREAS - Mother Lode leaders who fought a proposal to enlarge Pardee Reservoir cheered Monday when the East Bay Municipal Utility District announced it was backing off the controversial plan.

A higher dam at Pardee is no longer included in the district's draft water supply plan for the next 30 years.

Expanding Pardee would have inundated a popular white-water run on the Mokelumne River east of the lake as well as sites where American Indians gather traditional plant materials.

"People up here really love this river," said Katherine Evatt, president of the board of the Foothill Conservancy. "And I think the newer management at East Bay MUD understands that better than the previous manager did."

Alexander Coate, general manager of utility district, was promoted to the post in January when Dennis M. Diemer retired.

The utility has been working for years to draft a plan for meeting the water needs of its 1.3 million customers in Oakland and other East Bay cities.

A number of individuals and groups in Amador and Calaveras counties protested the proposed expansion of Pardee.

Critics of the expansion said EBMUD leaders should instead consider other options, such as conservation or helping with the expansion of another reservoir in the East Bay.

The utility's board of directors in October 2009 voted to keep the Pardee expansion as part of its 2040 plan. Environmental groups sued. A judge ruled that the utility had to redo some of the studies in the proposed expansion.

Those revisions, due today, prompted the change, utility district officials said.

Richard Sykes, EBMUD's manager of natural resources, said that the agency has worked with the Contra Costa Water District on a proposal under which the two would cooperate on an expansion of Los Vaqueros Reservoir, north of Livermore. Los Vaqueros takes its water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

"There is good potential," Sykes said of the Los Vaqueros expansion proposal. "And that is another thing that helped make some changes in our water plan."

Sykes said the change still must go through public hearings, including meetings in Calaveras and Amador counties in January. After that, it will go to the East Bay utility's board for approval in February.

Steve Wilensky, a Calaveras County supervisor whose district is bounded by the Mokelumne River, said the good news goes beyond saving the popular white-water run, where the Mokelumne crosses Highway 49.

"Having this thing bite the dust invites a new era of trust and cooperation," Wilensky said. In particular, Wilensky said he hopes to work out arrangements under which water users help pay for work in mountain county forests that will help protect the water supply.

Sykes said the utility intends to cooperate with communities on a variety of matters. Some specific ideas, like a groundwater banking project in San Joaquin County and a proposal to increase the size of Lower Bear River Reservoir, in Amador County, are in the plan.

"That doesn't change," Sykes said.

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