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Utility expresses interest in water project

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By JANET ZIMMERMAN
The Press-Enterprise

Western Municipal Water District in Riverside is among five Southern California suppliers that have expressed interest in a controversial proposal to store and draw water from ancient aquifers in the Mojave Desert, officials confirmed Thursday.

The $200 million project in the Cadiz Valley, about 40 miles east of Twentynine Palms, would involve burying 44 miles of pipeline to move surplus Colorado River water to an underground basin the size of Rhode Island.

The water rights under 35,000 acres belong to Cadiz Inc., which also wants to tap water from beneath nearby dry lake beds that it says would otherwise be lost to evaporation.

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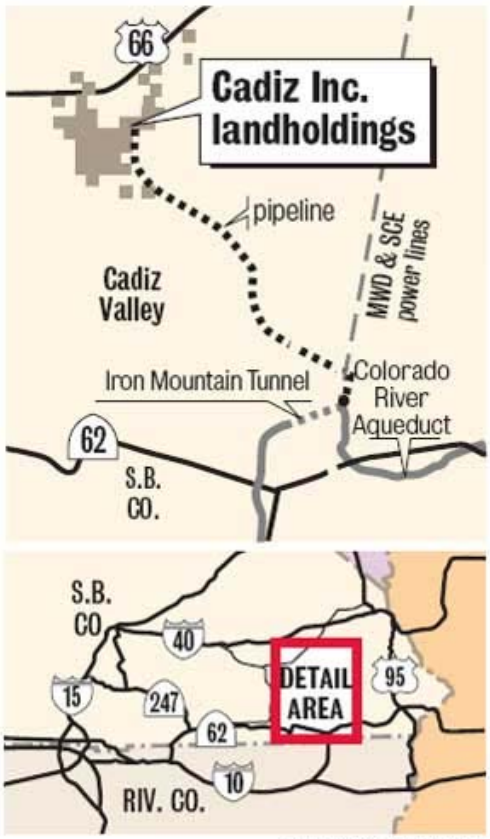

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The Los Angeles-based company announced last month that five water providers signed letters of intent to evaluate the project and share the costs of an environmental review, with options to buy the water. Cadiz Inc. identified Golden State Water Co. in San Dimas, a private company serving desert communities in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, as one of the interested parties but would not identify the others until an agreement is reached.

However, Anaheim Public Utilities, serving 110,000 customers, also has signed "a non-binding letter of interest" on the project, spokeswoman Margie Otto said.

Western's general manager, John Rossi, acknowledged that his district is considering joining the project, which would divert water from the Colorado River Aqueduct for storage. In dry times, the water would be returned to the aqueduct for use by customers. Western serves Corona, Norco, Lake Elsinore and parts of Murrieta, Temecula and Riverside.

"We're just trying to understand the technical merits at this point. We think the project may be able to provide some additional reliability," said Rossi, whose district gets most of its water from Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which built and operates the 242-mile Colorado River Aqueduct.

Cost is a factor, he said.

Water from the project will cost more than supplies from MWD, which charges about $600 per acre-foot for untreated water and $800 per acre-foot for treated supplies. The Cadiz water could cost an additional $278 per acre-foot and up to $445 more per acre-foot if it's treated, according to the district's published rate table. An acre-foot is enough to serve two families for a year.

But MWD rates have increased 35 percent in the past couple of years and are expected to jump 20 percent next year, he said, so "we're going to compare the two, and may the best price win."

Officials at Western will decide within the next couple of months whether to move forward with the environmental study, Rossi said.

The Cadiz project has been rejected and reworked in the eight years since it was first proposed.

Environmentalists say it would deplete ancient groundwater that feeds area springs and sustains local wildlife. One-third of the aquifer sits below the Mojave National Preserve.

Joshua Tree resident Elden Hughes, former chairman of the Sierra Club's desert committee, said his group worries about mixing salty Colorado River water with the pure Cadiz groundwater that is thousands of years old.

He also questioned the wisdom of drawing water from just under the surface of Bristol Dry Lake. Without the moisture, dust would threaten air quality of Mojave National Preserve, Hughes said.

Cadiz Inc. already is pumping from the aquifer to water grapes, citrus and vegetables the company grows in the area. Drawing off more would deplete the aquifer, Hughes said.

Scott Slater, general counsel for Cadiz Inc., said the plan has been reformulated to address environmental concerns. The company has partnered with the Natural Heritage Institute to ensure the project's sustainability, will allow solar development on up to 20,000 acres and is open to dedicating land for open space.

The project isn't limited to Colorado River water, he said. Water could be added to the pipeline system through exchanges with other sources and stored there. It also would capture tens of thousands of acre-feet of water that is now lost to evaporation, Slater said.

The project has changed quite a bit since it was rejected in 2002 by MWD, which was to be a partner and help build the pipeline. The agency backed out because of cost and environmental concerns.

Officials at MWD said Thursday that they were unaware of the latest on the project.

"Our questions deal with making sure there would be capacity in the aqueduct to accommodate any transfer, and would the participants be willing to pay the full system access fee -- the wheeling rates. Those are our

considerations," said Bob Muir, MWD spokesman.

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