

Carneros growers OK water fee

Ranchers, vineyard owners launch study to bring in recycled supply

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Carneros property owners last week voted overwhelmingly to fund a study to bring in recycled water to irrigate vineyard and ranches.

The vote means landholders in the Los Carneros Water District will pay \$15 per acre this year to launch a study, and may pay similar assessments for the next five years.

More than 160 of the 260 property owners in the district — which is roughly the area south of Highway 121, west of Stanly Lane and east of the Napa-Sonoma county line — cast their votes by the April 14 deadline.

Sixty-six percent of the property owners voted yes to the assessment and 34 percent voted no. In the weighted results that count — those who own more acreage have more of a say — the owners of about 77 percent of the acres said yes to the property tax assessment, while the owners of 23 percent of the acres said no.

Rancher John Stewart, director of the Los Carneros Water District, said the money will go to studying the specifics of bringing water to Carneros: Where pipelines might go, who would

want connections, how much it would cost to make those connections and how to route pipelines to minimize environmental or other problems.

John Ahmann, a rancher with 40 acres in Carneros who helped found the district more than 30 years ago, had a one-word response to the election results: "Yippee."

Water options

Carneros is one of several parts of Napa County where concerns about groundwater are growing. The most troubled region may be the Milliken-Sarco-Tulocay watershed east of the Napa River, where studies have shown a decades-long decline in the water table.

Stewart noted that the situation in Carneros is different than the MST, but said Carneros groundwater supplies are very spotty, with several property owners seeing an annual drop in the amount and quality of water they can pump as summer drags on.

Ahmann said it is not unusual for wells that turn out 50 gallons a minute early in the year to produce only five gallons of more salty, sulfurous water by the end of the dry season.

"In Carneros there are parcels that have great difficulty with well water," said Stewart. "There are a few isolated areas where you can find a relatively good (quantity of) ground water.

"What we're looking at is whether various properties will be interested in receiving recycled water, where they would be and if they will be able to use it beneficially," he said. "From that, you can determine what kind of infrastructure would be needed to supply the water and what would it cost."

Ahmann said that there are two likely sources for the recycled water: The Napa Sanitation District and a pipeline coming from Marin and Sonoma counties through the North Bay Water Reuse Authority.

The Carneros water district and NSD have negotiated in the past for delivery of reclaimed water, but no pipeline has been built.

Michael Abramson, general manager of NSD, said NSD is willing to discuss providing water to Carneros, but said NSD could not be expected to bear the full cost of building a pipeline.

The North Bay Water Reuse Authority is an agency made up of four water treatment agencies — Napa Sanitation District, Sonoma Valley County Sanitation District, Novato Sanitation District and Las Gallinas Sanitary District near the former Hamilton Air Force Base. The authority is seeking to create a regional solution to water problems by piping reclaimed water to sites around San Pablo Bay. One project is to deliver water to the former Cargill salt ponds in Napa County. The water is needed to flush the ponds after years of industrial use, with a long-term goal of restoring the area to natural wetlands.

To do that, the authority would have to build a pipeline through Carneros.

Ahmann said the North Bay authority is “already going to use the pipeline until the ponds are cleaned up. But after that, here would sit the pipeline. If it is in our backyard and our district, we’d be remiss to not be working with them.”

NSD’s Abramson, whose agency is also part of the North Bay Water Reuse Authority, said pipelines could come from both the Napa and Sonoma sides of the bay and connect near the

salt ponds.

In the wake of last week's vote, Stewart said he hoped that preliminary studies in the Carneros water district could wind up in three to six months. Then the water board would know where and whether to proceed in working with potential providers.

"The board has been working on this for a long time and it seemed important to ask for the community's support," he said. "Now, I believe there is a great responsibility for the board to move this ahead."

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