

With drilling window closed, Corps explores options

By Kathe Tanner

The window for work on Cambria beach tests has closed, and it's not clear what's next for the Army Corps of Engineers attempt to determine if underground ancient stream channels are suitable for desalination plant intake and outflow systems. With lawyers huddling, and suggestions, phone calls and e-mails still flying between agencies, agreement apparently hadn't been reached by mid-day Tuesday, Nov. 2, on how, when or if Corps' contractors might be allowed to drill one test hole in a State Park natural-preserve beach near the mouth of Santa Rosa Creek, then take soil and water samples from the hole.

The hole on State Parks land could prove the depth of an ancient underground channel from which the Cambria Community Services District hopes to draw seawater for a desalination plant.

Two holes have been drilled near county-owned Shamel Park, which granted permission for the Corps to pass, but State Parks has declined to let workers and power equipment onto its nearby state preserve land at the mouth of Santa Rosa Creek.

Cambria Community Services District President Greg Sanders doubts the Corp will release any reports "until they can examine the State Park beach area because that is where the 'Mother Lode' of paleo-channels" is apparently located.

The Corps must test water from the test wells for about a hundred potential contaminants before it can do test pumping, the state Coastal Commission has said. It also said work was to have stopped by Oct. 31.

The Corps has not shared any results with the services district, Sanders said, and did not respond to inquiries from The Cambrian about whether it has received results of the water tests.

Meanwhile, Corps' engineers apparently have dropped all other geotechnical testing, especially water-drawdown tests to determine how much salty water would be available at the site, according to communications sent to Tom Luster of the Coastal Commission.

The delay doesn't worry Sanders, who said the district's main concern was making sure the Corps encumbered federal funding before the so-called stimulus package expired on Sept. 30.

That funding pays to prepare detailed environmental studies and a preliminary design for the entire desalination plant project "without costing the CCSD any money," Sanders said. "That was hugely important. When the Corps completes the geotechnical project and gets all the test results back is secondary," because the studies and design will take a least a year.

According to desalination opponent Mahala Burton of Cambria, citing the Coastal Commission as a source, one thing the Corps did find out from drilling the first two holes was bedrock 24 feet under the beach, shallower than expected.

Any more drilling this year seems moot, despite the Corps' plea to the Coastal Commission for an extension and offer to use Amish work horses from Iowa to drag the drill rig onto the beach, rather than a tractor. Motorized vehicles aren't allowed on State Park nature preserves.

Commission and State Park staffers have requested additional details about the Corps' proposal.

Read more: <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2010/11/04/1354883/with-drilling-window-closed-corps.html#ixzz14c8Fm8YA>