

# Desalination a good deal for voters

## Joint plant would purify brackish water for region

Until recently, one of the many blessings we have enjoyed here in the Valley had been the plentiful availability of water. Unfortunately, many factors have combined to strain our only source of fresh water, the Rio Grande, to its very limit. These factors include the continuing drought, population growth on both sides of the border, and the ongoing treaty dispute with Mexico.

If present trends continue, we soon will be facing severe water restrictions, the proration or loss of our water rights, and a moratorium on new growth.

However, there is an alternative available to us that will both reduce our dependence on the Rio Grande and provide insurance against future droughts. This involves the use of brackish water, an underground source of water that is too salty to be treated using conventional technology but is much less salty than seawater.

Brackish water is plentiful here in the Valley. It can be converted into potable drinking water using a special technology called reverse osmosis. This technology is being used increasingly throughout the United States and the world to address the worsening water crisis.

The Laguna Madre Water District, the Brownsville Public Utilities Board, the Brownsville Navigation District and the cities of Los Fresnos, Rancho Viejo and Indian Lake are participants in a

### EDUARDO HERNANDEZ ANOTHER VIEW

special authority formed for the purpose of developing this brackish water. Known as the Southmost Regional Water Authority, this organization is managed by a board that consists of a representative from each of the members.

The authority will manage all aspects of the treatment and production of potable water from brackish sources. It is a non-profit entity that will sell the water it produces at cost to each of its members. There will be no special treatment; each member will pay the same cost per 1,000 gallons for this water.

The fact that Southmost offers us an alternative, drought-resistant source of water should be reason enough for us to participate. However, Southmost provides the additional advantage of being the lowest-cost alternative for us to acquire the additional water we need to meet future demands.

The reason for this is simple. Since all the cities are joining forces, we can build a larger and more efficiently run treatment plant than if we all constructed our own plants. This is known as "economics of scale" and is actively encouraged by state agencies like the Texas Water Development Board.

Further, if we buy water from Southmost, we can reduce operating costs at our existing plants and eliminate the need to buy expensive new water rights, assuming we can even find

them. Most importantly, we can delay expanding our current treatment facilities to meet this expected new demand. Taken together, these cost savings exceed the additional cost of water from Southmost.

Here at the Laguna Madre Water District, we are preparing for a Sept. 14 election that will determine how we will pay for the water we will purchase from Southmost.

Basically, our choices are either paying for this water through rates or through property taxes, or some combination of the two. The purpose of the election is to authorize the board to recover a portion of Southmost's costs through property taxes.

If paid through property taxes, we estimate that the cost would be 2.2 cents per \$100 of valuation. For an owner of a \$75,000 home, this amounts to about \$16.50 per year. If growth in our district continues at the same pace as the past, the additional assessed property valuation may even enable us to decrease our tax rate.

By contrast, if we paid out of water rates, the cost would be \$141.60 per year.

It's hard to argue against an option that provides an alternative source of water at a lower cost than conventional treatment. I urge our district's voters to support the property tax option. It's a better deal for ratepayer and will allow us to take full advantage of this important new alternative source of water.

Hernandez is general manager of the Laguna Madre Water District.