

Desalination funding may be available

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McALLEN — Local municipalities may soon be able to get their hands on state funding to build desalination plants to treat brackish groundwater or sea water and rely less on diminishing river water.

All 11 voting members present at the Regional Water Planning Meeting on Wednesday voted in favor of passing an amendment that details desalination as a water management strategy.

Desalination is a process that removes salt from brackish (salty groundwater) or sea water and makes it fit for human consumption.

Municipalities in the Rio Grande region are projected to use 56,200 acre-feet of desalinated water a year by 2010. Three plants, including one east of Edinburg, are already in preliminary planning stages, said Chuck Browning, general manager of the North Alamo Water Supply Corp.

The process would free up more river water for agricultural use, said Mary Lou Campbell, member of the local Sierra Club and a voting member of Rio Grande Regional Planning Group.

"The river is finite," Campbell said. "Even if Mexico paid their water debt, that's not going to answer all of our problems."

North Alamo Water Supply Corporation is already looking toward the possibility of three new desalination plants, Browning said.

Plans for a desalination plant east of Edinburg, one in the Raymondville area in Willacy County and another in Cameron County are still preliminary, Browning said.

Funding for the potential plants will probably come from TWDB, he said.

Although state funding may be available as soon as September, the process for opening up a desalination plant can take more than a year.

When water is desalinated, a concentrate, or by-product, is left behind.

Disposal options for the salty concentrate include discharging it into a surface water body of equal or greater salinity or to a sewer system, according to the amendment. Municipalities looking to open up a plant must apply for a discharge permit through the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

"As long as the by-product is handled and disposed of in an authorized manner, I think we're in pretty good shape," Campbell said.

But people living on farms, who depend on groundwater for everyday use, will have the water mined out from underneath them, Campbell said.

"I'm not sure it's a concern at this point, but it's something to think about," she said.