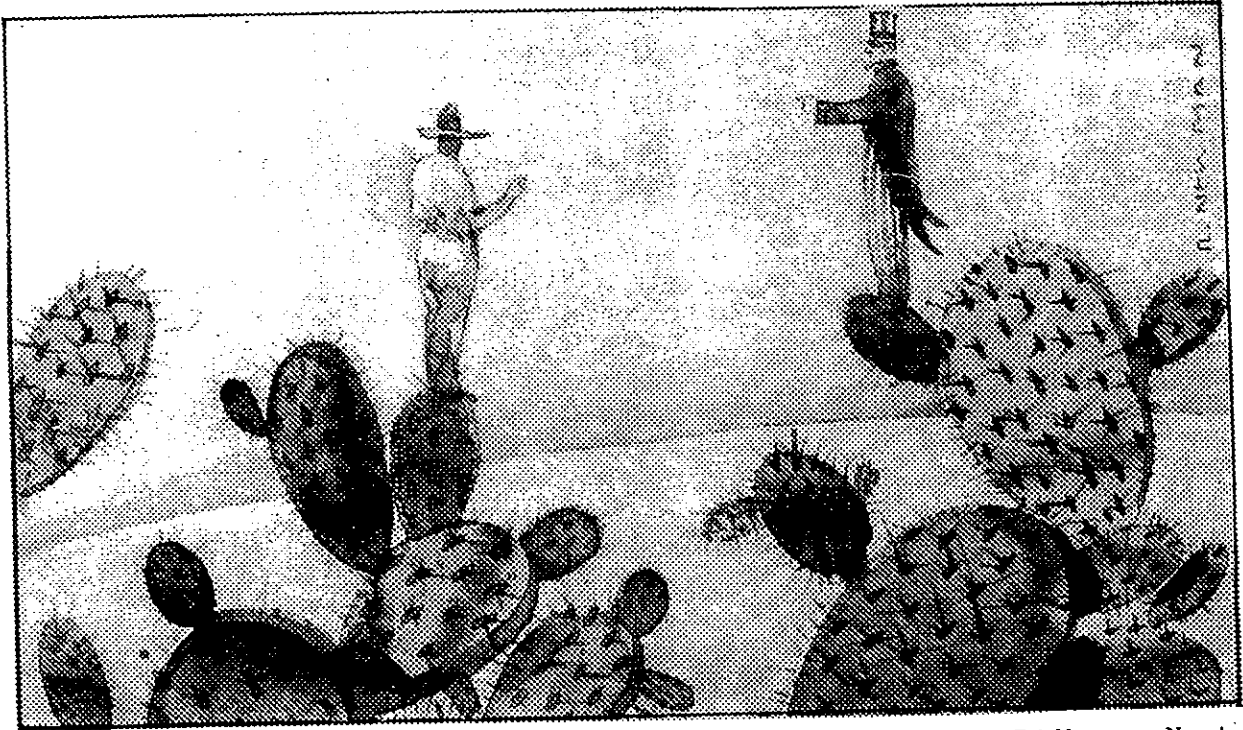



## California's next water war in Mexico



Bob Newman — Newsday

By Lawrence A. Herzog 

**A**S NEGOTIATORS iron out the details of a North American Free Trade Agreement, a new chapter in the saga of the West's often bloody struggle for water is about to begin.

One key actor is the San Francisco-based giant Bechtel Corp., which proposes to build the world's largest desalination plant on the coast of Baja California, just south of Tijuana.

Watching with keen interest are "the water guys" of Southern California — the Metropolitan Water District, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, the San Diego County Water Authority and others. If successful, the project could mark the beginning of a new era of water supply technology for drought-ridden California, and a new set of competing players in the West's water wars as well.

The plant would cost an estimated \$2 billion and would desalt some 100 million gallons of sea water a day — enough for a quarter of a million people. It would dwarf Bechtel's other big desalination plant in Saudi Arabia which, at four football fields long, is now the world's largest.

Despite exorbitant costs associated with desalination, many experts believe California has no choice but to build the plant. Even if new water sources are tapped in the northern part of the state and existing supplies recycled, the price of conventional water is expected to rise steeply, from \$1 per 1,000 gallons to at least \$2.50. By comparison, desalinated water — projected at \$4 per 1,000 gallons — begins to look more cost-effective.

The problem is that if the plant's immediate beneficiaries are to be in parched Southern California, why is Bechtel turning to equally dry Baja California to build it?

"It's really a matter of money and time," says Gordon Hess, an official at the San Diego County Water Authority. "In Baja, you can bet the plant will be built much faster than in California, maybe two to three years faster."

Unlike California, Baja offers cheap labor and large tracts of vacant land near the coast. Then, too, building large energy plants in California — Bechtel's plans call for a 500 megawatt power plant as well as the desalination facility — requires tackling six or

seven telephone book-size engineering studies, plus miles of reports and permit applications. "When you're talking about a plant like that on the shoreline, it's difficult to do in California," says Fred Wend of Bechtel's Los Angeles regional office.

Most important, Baja, unlike California, is far from an environmentalist's haven. There is no Mexican equivalent of the California Coastal Commission. "In the U.S.," admits Hess of SDWA, "even if you found a site for this kind of project, you might never build on it because of the not-in-my-backyard ecology people."

While there have been some stirrings from Mexico's Ministry of Development and Ecology, the real environmental problems associated with the plant have yet to be addressed. These are the effect of large intakes of seawater on marine life and the impact of discharging heated or chemically treated seawater back into the ocean. The plant will impact the already stressed Tijuana-Rosarito metropolitan area.

Despite these detractions, and the fact that for the first five years the plant will provide water exclusively to Californians, not Mexicans, the signal from officials in both Baja and Mexico City is thumbs up.

"Water and electricity are crucial for growth in Baja California," says Manuel Taylor of the Ministry of Economic Development in Mexico City. Eventually he believes the plant will be a new source of water supply for Baja.

Promoting U.S.-Mexico ventures fits in with the growing momentum toward the North American Free Trade Agreement. But even so, the desalination pro-

ject has its skeptics on the California side. Assemblyman Steve Peace, a Democrat whose 80th district includes the south San Diego border area, favors developing desalination for his district. But he opposes the idea of basing what would be the pacemaker for this new technology in Mexico.

"The single greatest need in Baja is water," he notes. "It's ludicrous for the U.S. to think it can get away with developing a potable source of water and pipe it right past a bunch of people who have a dramatic water shortage of their own. The pipeline would be physically attacked down there," he predicts. "No Mexican politician would last 30 seconds if they allowed that to happen."

But Peace also knows the allure of getting in at the ground floor of what may prove to be the most important new water source for the West in the decades ahead. "Historically, the water guys have resisted desalination in California because it meant opening a new supply of water and decreasing the power of the water authorities," he says.

But the drought is changing that. Two years ago, the San Diego Water Authority concluded that desalinated water would be the most cost effective and stable source of future water for the region. Now the pressure is on to show they're doing something it. Bechtel is the key game in town.

---

*Lawrence A. Herzog is professor of U.S.-Mexico border studies at San Diego State University. ©Pacific News Service.*