

Air Base to Buy a Billion Gallons of Water Annually Edwards: Officials sign a 10-year deal with the region's major supplier to help curtail ground-water pumping, which is cracking the space shuttle's runways.

[Valley Edition]

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Edwards Air Force Base, seeking to solve a serious water shortage and preserve the landing ground of the space shuttle, has agreed to buy more than a billion gallons of water a year from an Antelope Valley supplier, a deal that officials insist will not mean shortages for the rest of the region.

Air Force officials said their use of water from the Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency could help preserve the base's famed dry lake bed runways, where the shuttles land. The new water supply will allow Edwards to curtail ground-water pumping, which is believed to be contributing to the sinking and cracking of the lake bed.

But the agreement is not in time to save the Mojave Desert base from a second summer of water rationing.

Edwards, the second largest Air Force base in the 48 contiguous states, would initially pay nearly \$1.6 million a year under a 10-year contract with the water agency, known as AVEK, which wholesales water to the region.

"AVEK is definitely going to be an essential part of our infrastructure," said Bob Johnstone, chief of Edwards' plans and policies division. "Everyone is saying it's going to be expensive to use AVEK water. But we didn't really have any other options."

Edwards will pay the water agency nearly three times as much for water as the agency's other customers, mainly because the others pay taxes to the agency. But the air base, as federal property, does not.

Johnstone said he could not say how much the base now pays to produce its own water.

The water pact, which makes the agency the base's major water supplier, was approved Tuesday night by its board of directors. Air Force officials said a formal contract could be signed within a week. The pact had been under discussion for nearly a year, Johnstone said.

Edwards now gets all of its water from on-base wells. But many of those have been failing due to age or have been shut down because of natural arsenic contamination. When it has the agency's water, the base will use the wells only during the high-demand summer months.

Last summer, the estimated 20,000 daytime residents of the base, including employees and their families, sweated out mandatory water conservation measures because of the dwindling water supply.

Base officials predict that the same measures will be required this summer because, water agency officials said, they do not expect to begin supplying water to Edwards until early 1991. It will take that long for the agency to build a 1.25-mile pipeline connecting the base to a feeder line. That \$660,000 project is part of the overall contract.

The water the agency plans to supply to Edwards-nearly 3 million gallons a day-is equal to about 11% of all the drinking water supplied by the agency last year. Because of the drought, the agency this year expects that deliveries of water from the California Aqueduct will fall short of the demands by its water retailers. But agency General Manager Wallace Spinarski said the agency should have enough water by 1991, when the Edwards service will begin, to meet all demands.

The water agency is the major supplier of State Water Project water to a 2,300-square-mile area that includes the Antelope Valley and portions of Kern County.

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