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[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Local](#) > UC Sanitary District to negotiate water sale to Cronus

UC Sanitary District to negotiate water sale to Cronus

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Sanitary board gives its staff the green light to draw up a contract with the proposed fertilizer plant in Tuscola — a deal that could net the district \$2.3 million annually. But local environmentalists say they cannot endorse the agreement.

URBANA — Sanitary district board members on Thursday approved negotiations for the sale of treated wastewater to a proposed \$1.2-billion fertilizer plant in Tuscola.

But they did so without the support of environmentalists who worry that diverting water for industrial use will diminish the health of local rivers.

The Urbana & Champaign Sanitary District board approved a list of terms as district staff will now begin negotiating with Cronus Chemical LLC, which would need 6.3 million gallons of water per day in its fertilizer manufacturing process.

The company has proposed building a facility near Tuscola, and it has asked the sanitary district for a direct flow of treated wastewater instead of drawing clean drinking water.

Sanitary district Executive Director Rick Manner said that is one of two things that needs to happen before Cronus chooses Tuscola for the site of its \$1.2-billion facility, which officials say will create roughly 1,500 construction jobs during a 24- to 36-month building project and 150 permanent jobs when the plant begins operations.

The other, he said, is that Gov. Pat Quinn must sign a bill, which has already passed the House and Senate, including millions of dollars in tax rebates for the plant. Cronus officials have reportedly narrowed their siting options to the location in Tuscola and another in Mitchell County, Iowa.

The fertilizer producer needs 6.3 millions gallons of water per day to operate, and the sanitary district plans to offer a direct flow of water at \$1 per thousand gallons. That could net \$2.3 million annually for the sanitary district.

After raw sewage reaches the district's treatment facilities, it is cleaned through mechanical, biological and chemical processes and discharged into the Copper Slough and the Saline Branch. The district discharges roughly 20 million to 25 million gallons of water per day, and environmentalists say that flow is very important to recreation and wildlife in the area's streams and rivers.

Sanitary district officials have been working with Prairie Rivers Network, an advocacy group interested in protecting rivers and streams, to draw up the contract terms, which will now guide the negotiations. After much back-and-forth during the past weeks, the group told the board on Thursday that it could not support the list of terms.

“The district owns a valuable commodity that Cronus wants,” said Sarah Scott, a spokeswoman for Prairie Rivers Network. “Under this deal, they will get it very cheaply, and for a long time.”

The group has said it is concerned about the proposed 20-year term of the contract, though sanitary district officials said Cronus would not sign a deal without that assurance. Scott also said the district’s promise to prioritize the streams before its 6.3 million gallon per day commitment to Cronus is unenforceable.

“The current draft terms leave UCSD free, if it chooses, to stop making minimum diversions to the rivers if it decides it is in the public interest to halt them,” Scott said. “We are asking for a very limited right that would allow us to enforce the minimum discharge commitments.”

Sanitary board member Jerry Lyke said he was appreciative of the group’s input and that it has guided them through the process.

“We’ve listened to, I think, everything that Prairie Rivers has said,” Lyke said. “I think we’ve tried to incorporate some suggestions, not all. I think we get it.”

Sections (2): [News](#) [2], [Local](#) [3]

Topics (4): [Employment](#) [4], [Environment](#) [5], [Parks and Recreation](#) [6], [Politics and Government](#) [7]

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[3] <http://www.news-gazette.com/news/local>

[4] <http://www.news-gazette.com/topics/employment>

[5] <http://www.news-gazette.com/topics/environment>

[6] <http://www.news-gazette.com/topics/parks-and-recreation>

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