

Low well levels prompt special meeting Monday in Cambria

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Permit restriction means one of two aquifers can't be used; estimates say not enough left in the other to meet demand

By Bert Etling — betling@thetribunenews.com

Plummeting well levels mean Cambria has less water available than it would normally use in the next two months, so services district directors have called a special meeting for Monday morning to consider setting a date for on public hearing to consider charging surcharges on water users.

Low water levels are typical this time of year in the Cambria Community Services District's primary supply wells in the San Simeon Creek aquifer. What's different this year is that the district can't turn to its supply well on the Coast Union High School campus on Santa Rosa Creek. That well is still at usable levels, but a well downstream, near Shamel Park at the creek mouth, has dipped below a trigger point that means the district can't pump from the aquifer.

There are about 101 acre-feet of water left in the San Simeon aquifer, district staff estimates, but about 120 acre-feet of demand is expected over the next two months, before the rainy season begins.

The State Water Resources Control Board imposed the permit condition on the district's Santa Rosa Creek well to protect the riparian environment in the lower reaches of the creek, which several endangered species depend on as a fresh water source.

The district's three production wells on San Simeon Creek averaged 3.10 feet on Sept. 3, by far the lowest level in the past 10 years. The next lowest reading at the same time of year was just over 6 feet in 2008, slightly below 2007's reading.

Water use surcharges were last imposed in 2007. About one-third of Cambria's water uses paid anywhere from 25 to 450 percent in surcharges for using more than the district's average residential water use of 12 units of water (nearly 9,000 gallons) per two-month billing period, an average of about 150 gallons per day.

The surcharges were in place from July through December. They reduced water use an estimated 13 percent during the summer and 6 percent in the fall.

Surcharges were also imposed in 2004. Surcharges were considered late in 2008, but rains early in 2009 made it unnecessary.

The district directors' next regular monthly meeting is on Sept. 26. It's possible, Director Jim Bahringer confirmed Friday, that a public hearing could be called prior to that to consider imposing surcharges. Monday's meeting is only intended to discuss the current conditions, not to actually impose the surcharges.

At its meeting Aug. 22, the district board unanimously approved allowing the issuance of the first new intent-to-serve letters, a commitment necessary before prospective property owners can obtain a county building permit, since a water emergency was declared in November 2001. Any such new connections would only be allowed after new water use was offset by a 1.7-to-1 ratio, meaning more water savings would have to be proven than the new building would be expected to use.

The staff report for Monday's special meeting indicated consideration of issuing the water service commitments would be put off until early next year, partly to allow time for district staff to work with county staff on consideration of loosening the growth limit for the Cambria area, currently set at 0 percent.

The special meeting begins at 10 a.m. at the Veterans Memorial Building, 1000 Main St., Cambria. The open session will be followed by a closed session to discuss with legal counsel the state water board's notices of violations to the district regarding sewage spills in Cambria in January, October and December 2011.

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Cambria at risk of depleting its water supply

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A perfect storm of conditions has made this season especially dry, and some say shortage is a crisis

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Cambria's 6,200 residents are at risk of running out of water before there's sufficient rainfall to refill area creeks and aquifers, services district directors were told at a special meeting Monday.

The inability to use one of the town's two primary water supplies for much of this year interfered with how the Cambria Community Services District manages its water use. Now district ratepayers, already water thrifty, could face additional conservation mandates, see surcharges on their bills if they use more water than the average district user, and possibly pay \$1 million or so for a self-contained desalination system to keep taps flowing until there's sufficient rainfall to refill the water table.

Rain of that volume is not expected for at least two months. District Engineer Bob Gresens estimates there is about 101 acre-feet of water left in the San Simeon aquifer, but based on usage in a similar year, 2007, consumers would use about 120 acre-feet in September and October.

The board set a special public hearing for Sept. 20 to discuss and take action on possible fixes.

Surcharges were last imposed in July through December 2007, and the action reduced water use an estimated 13 percent during the summer and 6 percent in the fall. About a third of Cambria's water users paid anywhere from 25 to 450 percent in surcharges for using more than the district's average residential water use of 12 units (nearly 9,000 gallons) per two-month billing period, an average of about 150 gallons per day.

Board Vice President Jim Bahringer suggested looking into buying (perhaps with emergency funding) a \$1 million, 240,000-gallon-per-day, self-contained desalination system that could treat either brackish water pulled from a deep well on district property off San Simeon Creek Road or seawater from a well closer to the shoreline. The district usually produces about 700,000 gallons a day.

Director Amanda Rice suggested a more immediate action, such as going face-to-face with the 25 customers who use the most water, to see whether there's a way to reduce their consumption.

About 45 members of the public attended Monday's special meeting. Some made accusations that earlier in the year, the board and staff had ignored warnings from critics about the potential severity of the situation at a time when they could have done something about it.

District watchdog Tina Dickason threatened, "If you don't act in a way that is responsible, the next action is recall, and I will be the one to start it."

While low water levels are typical at this time of year, a perfect storm of conditions has made a bad situation critical — somewhere between an emergency and a crisis, according to board members, staffers and the 17 members of the public who spoke at the meeting.

Officials said causes of Cambria's well-level plummet include a statewide drought, warmer-than-usual weather and mechanical malfunctions on a well on the Santa Rosa Creek watershed. The district spent four months and more than \$200,000 repairing the pump and updating the well. During that time, the district had to rely solely on its wells along San Simeon Creek. That use drained the aquifer faster than usual.

Levels in the aquifers have plummeted since mid-August, including at a monitoring well that determines when the district can and cannot pump from the Santa Rosa Creek well. The State Water Resources Control Board says to protect the habitat, the trigger point on that monitoring well is 3 feet. At that level or below, the district can't use the upstream well. As of Monday's meeting, the monitoring well reading had rebounded slightly to 2.98 feet from 2.90.

Levels in the district's three San Simeon Creek production wells averaged 3.10 feet on Sept. 3, by far the lowest level in the past decade. The next lowest was 6.32 feet in 2002.

Read more here: <http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2013/09/09/2675542/cambria-at-risk-of-depleting-its.html#storylink=cpy>