

Tradeoff for state water discussed

County may require agencies to recharge ground water basins

By Jerry Bunin
Telegram-Tribune

The county may attach some strings to how local governments can use water from the State Water Project.

Those getting state water could be required to use some of it to replace any underground or surface water coming from sources that are slowly being pumped dry.

County officials have discussed including such conditions in contracts for state water, said County Engineer Clint Milne, who noted that he plans to caution the county Board of Supervisors before taking such an action.

"Some communities have strongly objected," he said.

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"They aren't arguing that it is inappropriate. They just don't like the idea of the county as 'Big Brother.' "

As for the proposal, "I think it is good planning," Milne said. New water sources should be used to meet existing needs, he said, before they serve future growth.

The greatest "overdraft" — where water is pumped out faster than nature replenishes it — in the county is in the Paso Robles water basin, Milne said. Paso Robles, Atascadero, Templeton, Shandon and other water users are overdrafting the Paso Robles basin by some 30,000 acre-feet each year.

While that may sound like a lot — an acre-foot is enough water to serve a family of five for a year — the basin is huge, Milne explained. It spreads over 600 square miles in this county and several hundred more in Monterey County.

The proposal being considered would make each water agency responsible for restoring a very small percentage of the overdraft, Milne said.

For example, he said, Shandon could lose the use of 30 acre-feet that it still must pay for. The town has expressed interest in several hundred acre-feet.

The impact on the city of San Luis Obispo, he said, is hard to tell until a study on the area's ground water basin is completed.

The city's water problems are complicated, Milne said, because Santa Margarita Lake can only safely provide 70 percent of the 5,000 acre-feet San Luis Obispo thought it was capable of delivering.

Some state water, he said, could be used for new

Oceano may cut state water request

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The high cost of state water will probably force Oceano to cut its request for water 30 percent.

Water bills would have to nearly double within three years, said District General Manager Berkley Brannon said Wednesday, if the Oceano Community Services District took 1,000 acre-feet from the state.

The district just raised water bills by almost 25 percent to make up a \$120,000 deficit in the community's water budget.

"We don't need 1,000 acre-feet right now," Brannon said, "but 80 percent

of the costs would have to come right now."

The 80 percent payment would be due within three years, he said, to bring water from the state pipeline to Oceano.

"We will need 1,000 acre-feet for full buildout by 2010," he said, explaining that before then, Oceano may be able to find more water from other sources, such as conservation or Lake Nacimiento.

Even if Oceano gets 700 acre-feet from the state, Brannon said, "it would be a chunk of change" for Oceano residents to pay.

The cost of state water "keep(s) creeping up," said Larry Baughman,

longtime member of the OSCD board of directors.

"No one knows how much it will cost," he said. "Originally, it was \$450 an acre-foot and now it looks closer to \$600.

The district will probably have to cut back to something close to its original request of 750 acre-feet, he said. "We wanted to go to complete buildout, but can't afford it."

A final decision won't be made until after the county Board of Supervisors holds a special meeting March 25 on the State Water Project.

Oceano has a special meeting called for 7:30 p.m. March 18 to review possible ways to pay for state water.

Recharge

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development the city has already approved, based on what planners thought the lake could provide.

Nipomo has an entirely different problem, Milne said. Nipomo's main wells are outside the boundaries of the agency that provides water, the Nipomo Community Service District.

If the ground water basin there is being overdrafted, Milne said, then the district's water rights are secondary to those of the people who own the land on top of the basin.

The proposal to use some state water to eliminate existing overdrafts started with an idea in the project's environmental impact report, Milne said.

It suggested the idea as a way to reduce the chance that bringing state water here will cause growth, he said. "The county staff thinks it is common sense."

However, the rumor that local agencies would have to give up their rights to ground water "is absolutely not true," Milne said.

That rumor was discussed this week by the Arroyo Grande City Council and Oceano Community Services District officials this week.

"The county doesn't have that authority," Milne said. "Only the courts can adjudicate ground water rights. The state can't do it either. The state doesn't have any more right to regulate ground water than we do."

The issue will be discussed at a

special March 25 meeting of the county Board of Supervisors.

The board will also be asked to accept the project's environmental impact report, to approve further processing of the project and whether the county wants all of the 25,000 acre-feet it's been allotted.

Then water agencies countywide will have about a month to decide if and how much state water they want.

mmm... good. Dairy Queen. Located in the Food Court CENTRAL COAST PLAZA