

Nipomo awash in state water

Voters say no twice but still get 4,650 acre-feet

By Jerry Bunin
Telegram-Tribune

State water could cause development pressure on Nipomo, even though voters there twice rejected the project.

Nipomo could get 4,650 acre-feet of water, nearly half of the 10,600 acre-feet of state water being imported to the county.

Most of the water is coming because county supervisors decided late last month to take another 5,833 acre-feet of state water after being lobbied by farmers, developers and others.

That's on top of the 4,728 acre-feet supervisors agreed to take last May.

Supervisor Evelyn Delany, the deciding vote in a series of 3-2 decisions in November, acknowledged that giving state water to the Nipomo area could free up well water for residential development.

"It will probably have some effect on growth. That wasn't intended," she said

Wednesday. "We're not offering to change the county's growth rate.

"State water is supposed to replace ground water that would have allowed growth anyway," Delany said, noting that the county's growth strategy is to channel development toward the Nipomo and Paso Robles areas.

State water "is a lousy project and wouldn't have a chance if it were proposed today," Delany said. "I voted to participate because we had legitimate agencies who wanted to participate, elected people with a constituency and long-term plans for their communities."

Some state water coming to Nipomo will actually come through Santa Barbara County. California Cities Water Co. has a contract with the county to send 725 acre-feet north to its 1,000 customers in downtown Nipomo.

Cal Cities serves the downtown area that's just outside the Nipomo Community Services District, where voters twice turned down state water — 13 months ago and again in May after district directors tried to overturn the first election.

"There's no giant conspiracy here," said Roger Brett, Cal Cities regional manager. "Look at the diverse range of interests bringing water here. ... That's just the way

the cards fell."

In addition to Cal Cities, state water could reach Nipomo in other ways, what with 125 acre-feet going to the Rim Rock subdivision, 2,000 acre-feet going to 30 farmers northeast of downtown Nipomo, and 1,800 acre-feet to The Woodlands, a resort and industrial park northwest of downtown.

"The whole issue is ironic at this point," said Deputy County Engineer Glen Priddy about where state water is and isn't going.

State water is attractive to some in the Nipomo area because they are far from other sources, like Lake Nacimiento, he said.

Gene Mehlschau, a spokesman for the Nipomo farmers, said state water will be expensive and unreliable, but it's less expensive than the alternatives.

"All water sources are unreliable. Look at the dams in this county. They're low. The only source that's always full is the Pacific Ocean and desal costs too much."

Mehlschau will probably pay \$700 to \$800 an acre-foot, about \$300 more than it costs to pump ground water. But his ground water has become too salty, cutting his production in half. He plans to mix his well

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Sullivan said food companies will likely begin putting the new labels on their foods next year, but won't be required to do so until May 1994.

He estimated the process of changing hundreds of thousands of labels would cost industry about \$2 billion.

"While we do not agree with each and every decision, we will now start the enormous job of providing this new information to consumers as soon as possible," said C. Manley Molpus, president and chief executive officer of the Grocery Manufacturers of America.

The labeling rules will not apply to restaurant menus, but any restaurant that posts a sign advertising a "low-fat" food must make sure the food complies with the government's definition.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., one of the law's authors, said it also requires menus to comply with government definitions and exempting them "is unfortunate and probably illegal."

water with state water.

Keith Gurnee, representing The Woodlands owners — Hanson Industries, headquartered in London and New Jersey — expects water will be mixed there as well.

In addition to state water, The Woodlands has asked the South County sanitary plant for 1,800 acre-feet of treated wastewater to be used on three golf courses planned for 940 acres near Highway 1 and Willow Road.

The Woodlands — which could also include three resorts with 1,000 hotel rooms, 60 acres of commercial development, a 70-acre industrial park and up to 300 homes — sits on top of a rich ground-water basin, Gurnee said.

"We'll probably use some combination," he said.

By using more state water than ground water and by creating jobs, the project will almost certainly lead to residential development around Nipomo, he said.

That's is part of the county's "rural

settlement strategy," he said. "The key is make sure that growth doesn't disturb or obliterate the rural character everyone wants out there."

The situation disturbs Charles Guylash, one of the chief state water opponents in the two Nipomo elections.

"It's discouraging after all the work and all the talking, and it seemed people were getting a better idea of state water. Now it's come to this," he said.

But his biggest concern isn't that state water will cause development. Guylash is more worried that people will build on a promise of state water that's going to evaporate.

This year, because of the seven-year drought, the system may deliver only 10 percent of what was promised. "I hope we don't paint ourselves into a corner pretending this is the bailout.

"There's going to be less and less state water to go to more and more people," Guylash said. "In 20 years, the State Water Project is going to be a memory. That's my prediction."