

# Pismo is gambling on water

PISMO BEACH — The city is playing a kind of Russian roulette with its water supply.

Pismo Beach is betting that developers will pay now to get state water later if the city gives them some of its existing water supply until the state supply arrives.

As an added incentive, the city will offer the state water now for about \$4,000 per home, a little less than developers would pay if they wait until 1997, when the state pipeline is expected to be completed.

But if state water doesn't come when planned and if the city allows too much development to occur, Pismo Beach might not have enough for everyone, several city officials cautioned.

Current city residents could be trapped either way, said council members John Brown and Marian Mellow, both state water opponents.

People now living in Pismo Beach might not have water if there is too much development and there is no state water, Brown and Mellow said, or they could have to pay \$1.9 million for state water by 1997 if it comes and developers don't build.

The City Council tried Tuesday to prepare for the future without hurting the present. The council changed a law so developers would find it easier to build now so they'd start paying immediately for state water.

Under a revised plumbing retrofit law, builders can either reduce water use in existing homes or pay \$4,000 per new home toward 1,240 acre-feet of state water Pismo Beach is buying.

Developers previously only had the option of retrofitting existing homes with water-saving fixtures, but they've recently reported that the city is running out of homes with toilets to replace.

Changing the retrofit ordinance sparked a dispute between Public Works Commission members and Public Works Director Jim Ashcraft.

Commissioners accused Ashcraft of ignoring their work because his staff report differed from their recommen-

# County/state

## Water

Continued from A-1

dents are already doing more than we would have to mandate."

Thanks to the March 1991 "miracle rains" and last year's 22.53 inches of rain -- compared to the average 19.94 inches at Santa Margarita Lake -- the city's main water source is 79 percent full.

That's nearly twice as much as its 43 percent level at this time last year.

Henderson said the city is getting most of its water from the lake, but a portion is coming from ground water. One of the city's wells was recently shut down because of high nitrate levels.

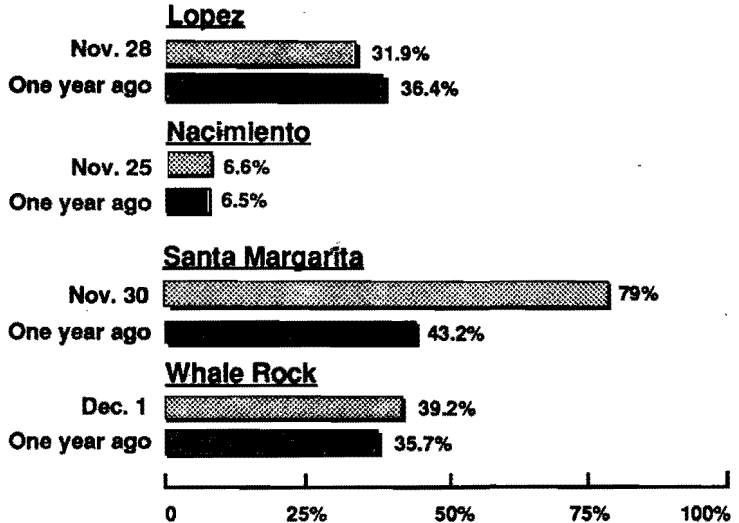
That shutdown could mean that mandatory conservation measures would be implemented three or four months earlier, Henderson said, but they still wouldn't be considered before April.

Another complicating factor in the county's water picture is the possibility that Lopez Lake may be drained in order to bring the dam up to current earthquake safety standards.

That decision probably won't be made for about 10 months, Milne said, and the dam would be drained, if necessary, in four or five years. In the meantime, the lake can be kept only 60 percent full -- about twice as much

## County reservoir levels

Water levels reported at area lakes. Figures represent percentage of total capacity.



water as it contains now. At its current level, the lake contains perhaps two years' worth of water, said Van Lurn, Arroyo Grande's public works director.

"A seventh year of drought would not have a major impact on us," Lurn said, "but it would impact us in the eighth year."

Jon Crawford, Morro Bay's public works director, isn't panicked either.

While he'd certainly welcome a wet winter, he said city officials were "pleasantly surprised that the basins recharged fairly dramatically from last year's rains."

The ground-water basins are at their highest levels since 1987 for this time of year, Crawford said, so "we are as prepared as we probably could be at this point for entering another year of drought."

## Drought

Continued from A-1

electricity at hydroelectric power plants.

It provides nearly two-thirds of the water used by nearly 16 million