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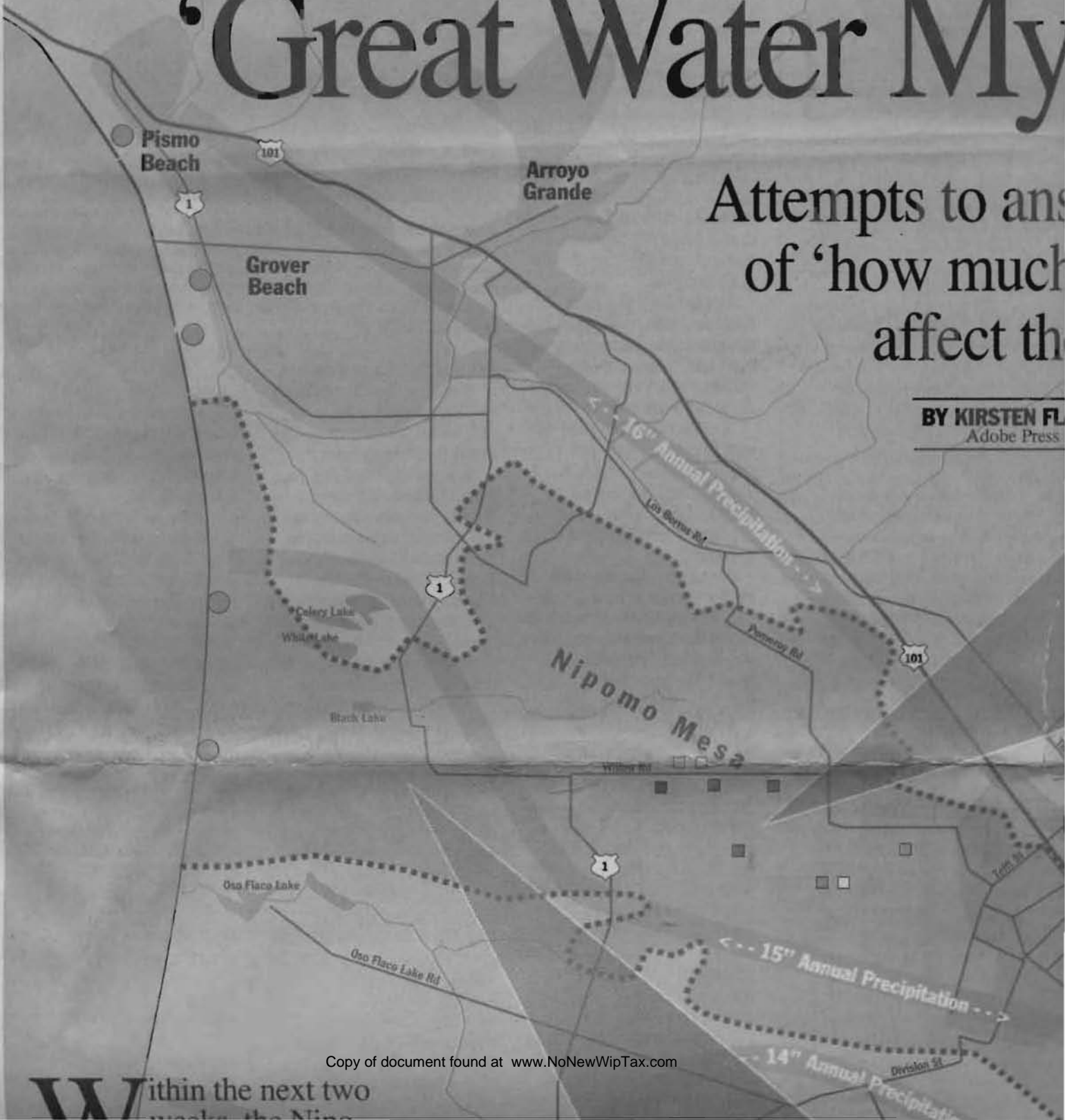
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ADOBE PRESS SPECIAL REPORT

Nipomo's 'Great Water My

Attempts to ans
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BY KIRSTEN FL
Adobe Press



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ADOBE PRESS SPECIAL REPORT

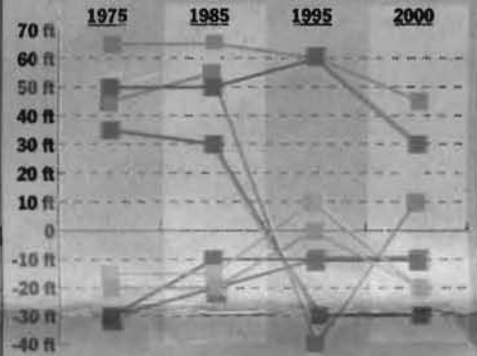
Nipomo's Water Mystery

Attempts to answer the questions of 'how much' and 'who' could affect the future of growth

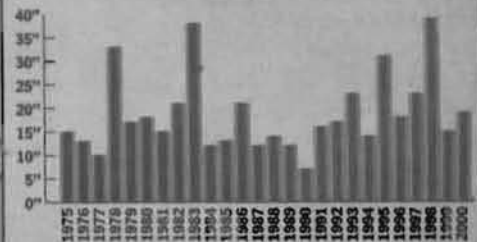
BY KIRSTEN FLAGG
Adobe Press

Is Nipomo's groundwater basin in "overdraft?"

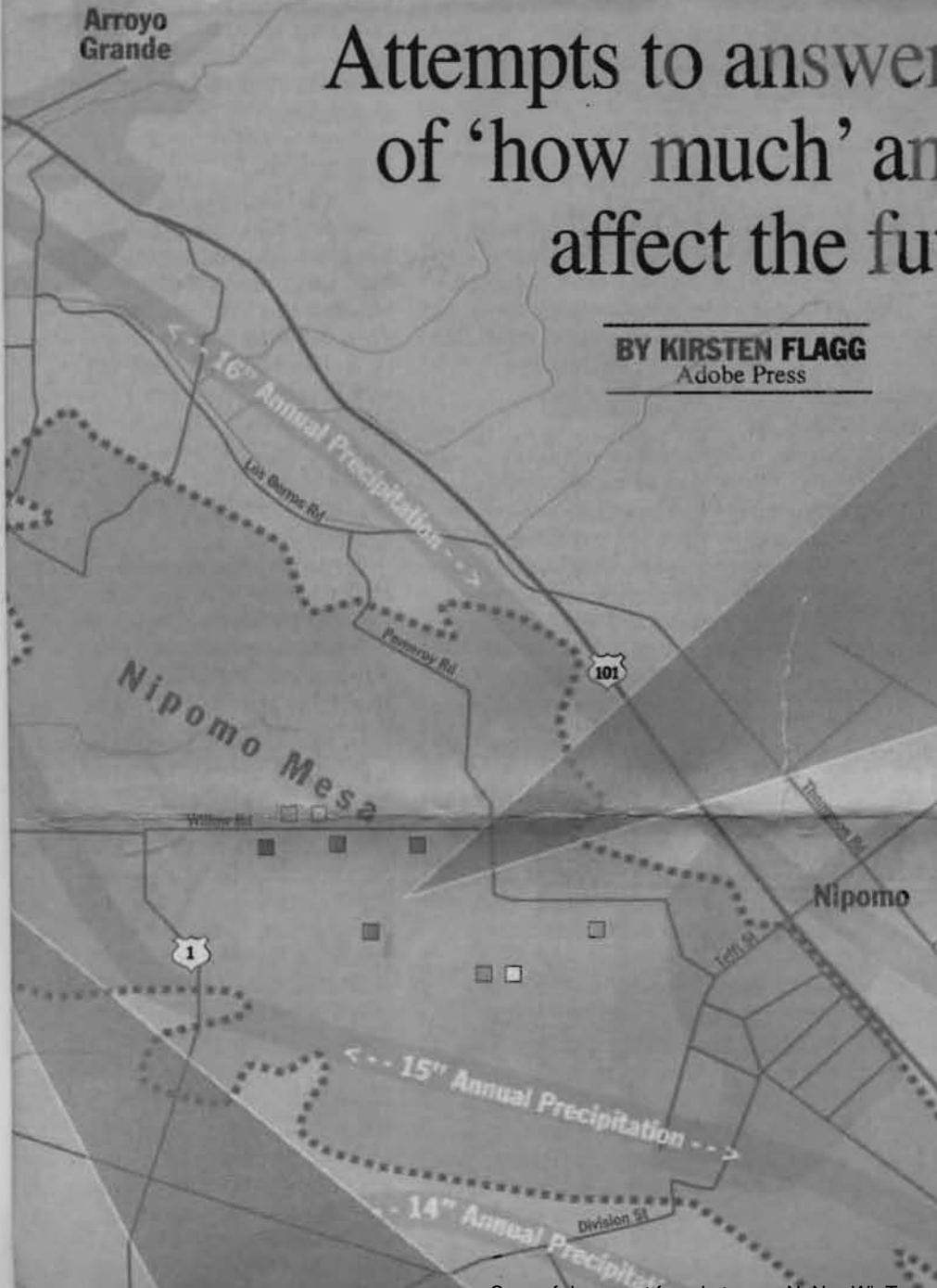
Overdraft: "the condition of a groundwater basin or subbasin in which the amount of water removed by pumping exceeds the amount of water that recharges the basin over a period of years."



The nine wells studied showed fluctuations in the elevation of the water in the wells, shown above in feet above or below sea level.



Annual precipitation totals from 1975 through 2000 depict highs of over 35" to lows below 10", with an average of 18.7".



Within the next two weeks, the Nipomo Mesa Water Task Force will make recommendations to the Nipomo Community Services District whether to limit who gets to tap into its wells in the future, a measure that could affect the pace of growth in the area.

In anticipation of the decision, NCSO has put a hold on all new promises for future water service — known as “intent to serve” letters — while the task force wades through five reports and a court ruling to determine just how much water is available in Nipomo.

David Church of the county’s Local Agency Formation Commission, who went through a similar process when he had to revise the sphere of influence boundaries for Nipomo, called it the “great water mystery of Nipomo.”

“I think hydrogeology and groundwater basin are very difficult to analyze. It’s very challenging to analyze how it’s (the basin) going to respond over time to continued growth,” said Church.

The controversy revolves around the word “overdraft.” A basin is in overdraft when the amount of water being extracted exceeds the amount of water being replaced by such natural sources as rainfall, runoff and percolation from above-ground basins.

What is unclear is what constitutes proof of overdraft. Some say an analysis of water

supply and demand conducted over a significant period, including both wet and dry periods, is enough to determine if a basin is in overdraft. Others say actual physical harm due to the overdraft must be proven for the label to be attached to a basin.

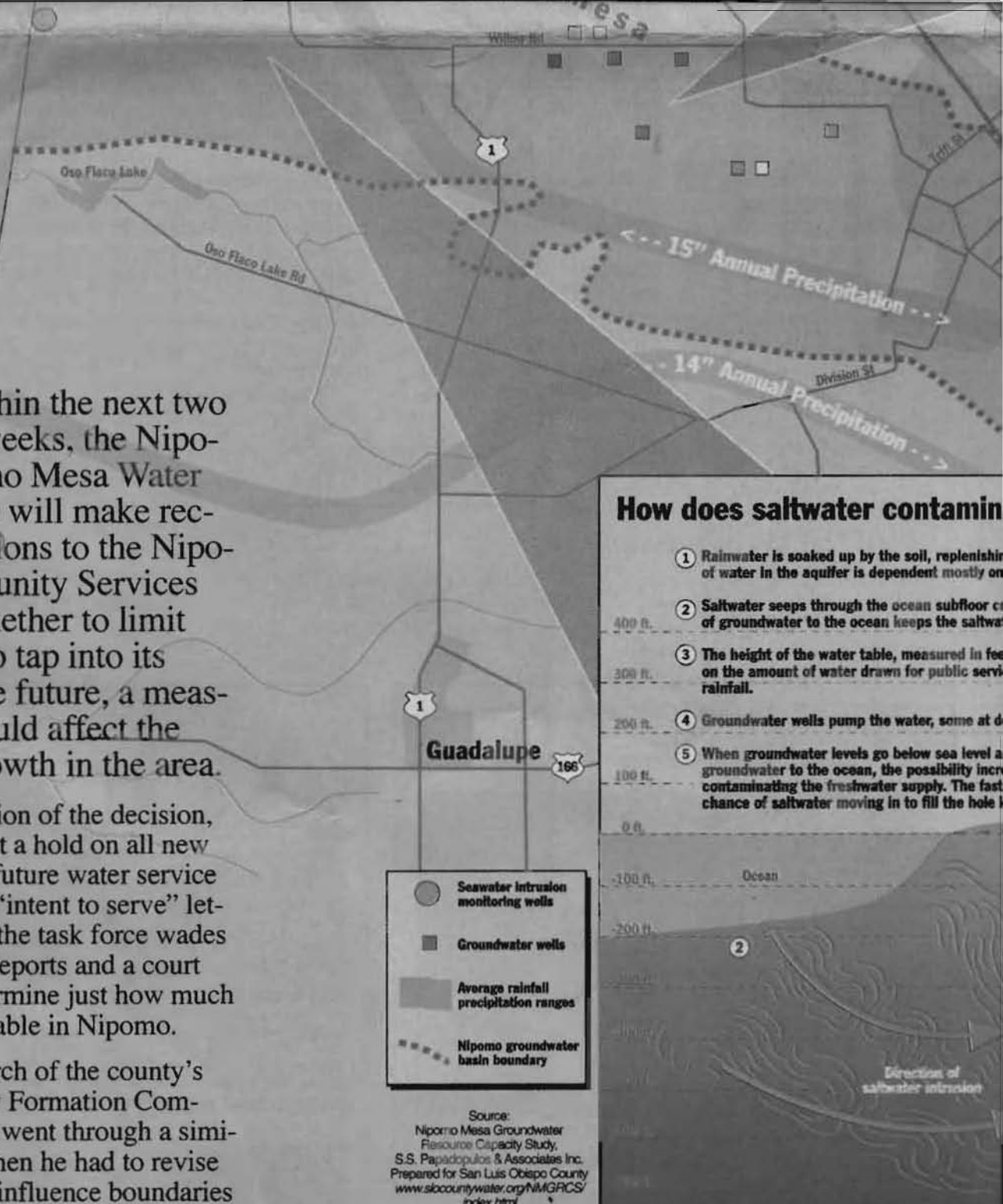
San Luis Obispo County’s most recent study declares that the basin under the Mesa is in overdraft, but the court presiding over a complex groundwater lawsuit involving NCSO ruled it is not, based on a lack of physical evidence.

The area in question is the Nipomo Mesa, 27.5 square miles of rolling hills and deep

sandy soil rising above the Santa Maria Valley, which has absorbed much of the County’s recent development. Unlike the city of Santa Maria, which buys its water from the state, Nipomo extracts its water from the ground.

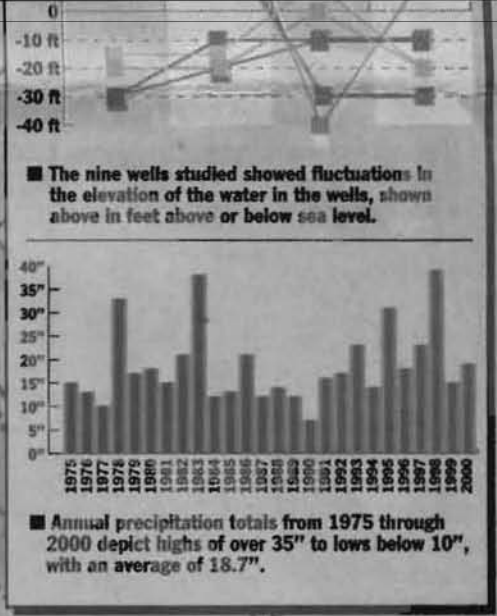
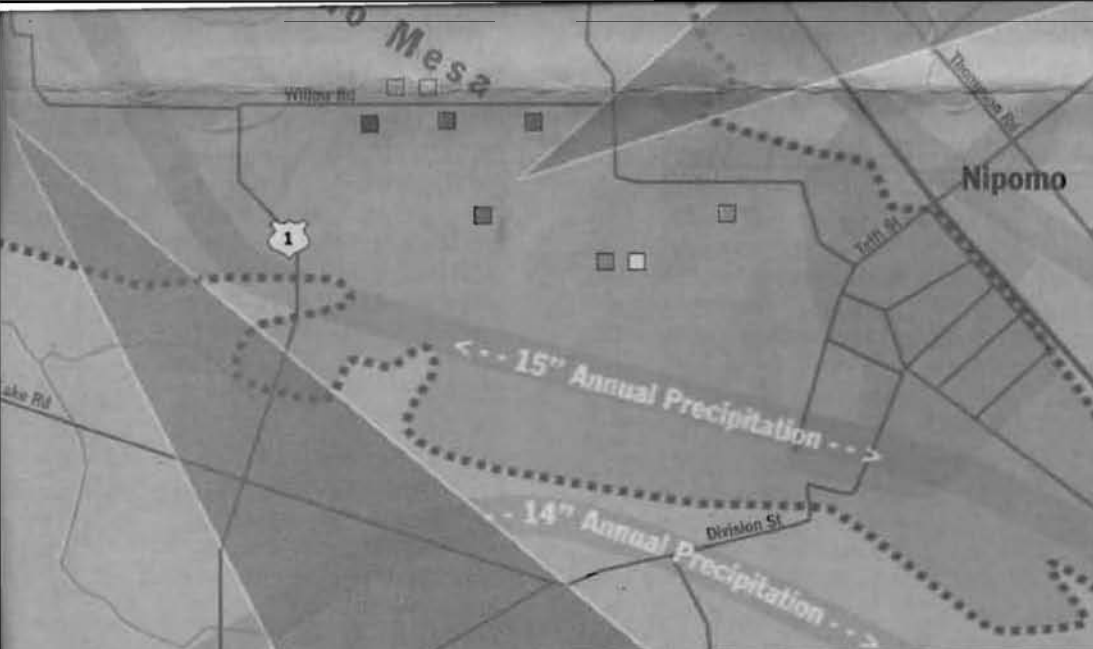
“The amount of water that gets to the system varies very widely on the amount of rainfall and the kind of vegetation,” said Jim Garing, consulting engineer for NCSO.

The fear is not necessarily that the water will dry up but that overpumping of the Nipomo Mesa could lead to sea water being



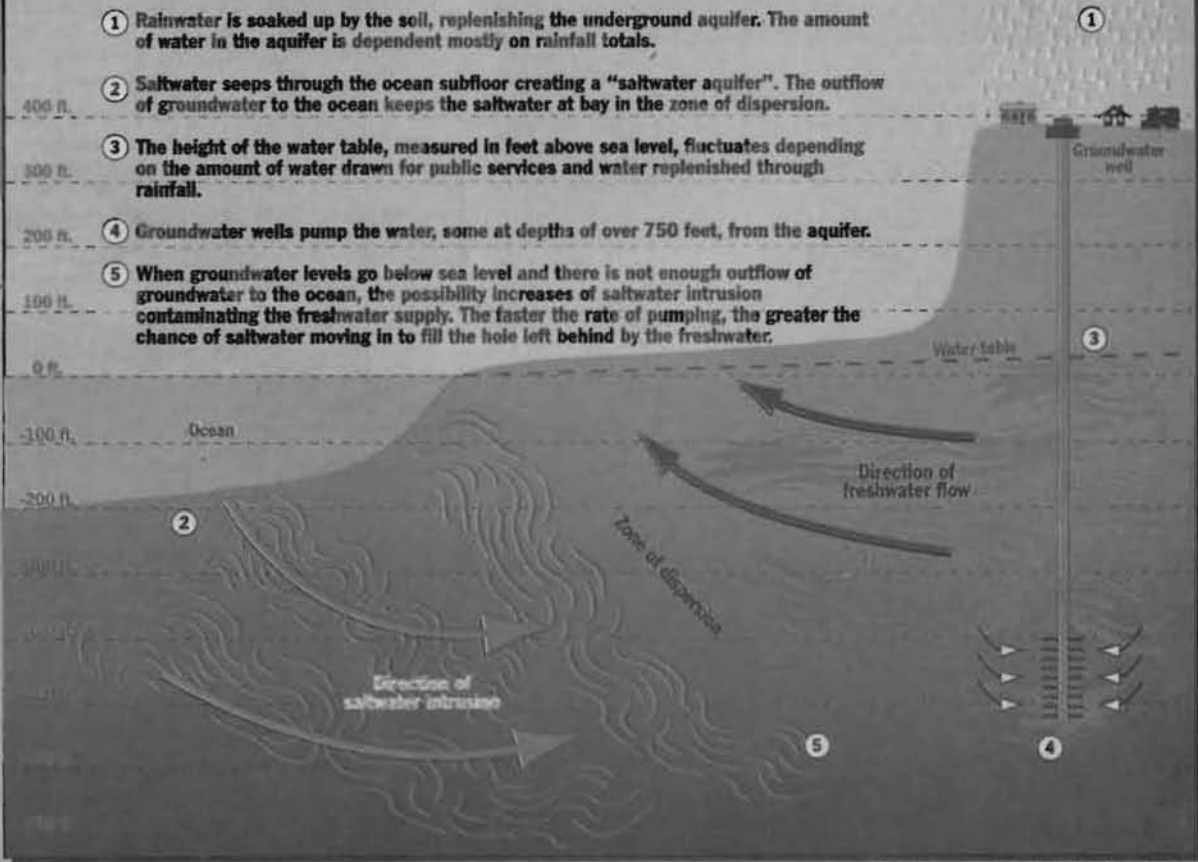
How does saltwater contamination

- 1 Rainwater is soaked up by the soil, replenishing of water in the aquifer is dependent mostly on
- 2 Saltwater seeps through the ocean subfloor of groundwater to the ocean keeps the saltwa
- 3 The height of the water table, measured in feet on the amount of water drawn for public servi
- 4 Groundwater wells pump the water, some at d
- 5 When groundwater levels go below sea level a groundwater to the ocean, the possibility incre



How does saltwater contaminate the freshwater supply?

- 1 Rainwater is soaked up by the soil, replenishing the underground aquifer. The amount of water in the aquifer is dependent mostly on rainfall totals.
- 2 Saltwater seeps through the ocean subfloor creating a "saltwater aquifer". The outflow of groundwater to the ocean keeps the saltwater at bay in the zone of dispersion.
- 3 The height of the water table, measured in feet above sea level, fluctuates depending on the amount of water drawn for public services and water replenished through rainfall.
- 4 Groundwater wells pump the water, some at depths of over 750 feet, from the aquifer.
- 5 When groundwater levels go below sea level and there is not enough outflow of groundwater to the ocean, the possibility increases of saltwater intrusion contaminating the freshwater supply. The faster the rate of pumping, the greater the chance of saltwater moving in to fill the hole left behind by the freshwater.



- Seawater intrusion monitoring wells
- Groundwater wells
- Average rainfall precipitation ranges
- Nipomo groundwater basin boundary

Source:
 Nipomo Mesa Groundwater
 Resource Capacity Study,
 S.S. Papadopoulos & Associates Inc.
 Prepared for San Luis Obispo County
www.slcoountywater.org/NMGPCS/index.html

Adobe Press graphic/Michael A. Mariant

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The area in question is the Nipomo Mesa, 7.5 square miles of rolling hills and deep

sandy soil rising above the Santa Maria Valley, which has absorbed much of the South County's recent development. Unlike the city of Santa Maria, which buys supplemental water from the state, Nipomo extracts all its water from the ground.

"The amount of water that gets into that system varies very widely on the amount of rainfall and the kind of vegetative cover," said Jim Garing, consulting engineer for NCSO.

The fear is not necessarily that the ground will dry up but that overpumping on the Mesa could lead to sea water being pulled

into the fresh-water basin.

As groundwater levels go below sea level and outflow of groundwater to the ocean decreases, the risk increases for saltwater contamination.

"And once that happens, it's almost impossible to reverse," said Doug Jones, NCSO general manager.

Other coastal counties — including Monterey and Ventura — have already experienced that fate.

Currently, there is no evidence of seawater intrusion, but some hydrologists worry

Water: Multiple conflicting studies cloud the answer

WATER, FROM PAGE 1

about depressions in the southwest corner of the Mesa.

Surface depressions are located where the groundwater level below has dropped at a much faster rate than the surrounding basin, allowing the land to sink in that area. One of those depressions is near an NCS D well.

To determine how worried they should be, members of the water task force are looking at hydrologic reports prepared on behalf of government agencies and large developers. In addition, they must consider the implications of the recent court ruling. They have their work cut out for them.

Water task force's mission grows, blurs

KIRSTEN FLAGG
Adobe

The mission of the task force designed to clear up confusion around water issues in Nipomo has itself become a source of confusion.

The Nipomo Mesa Water Task Force was initially created as an ad-hoc committee by the Nipomo Community Services District board in a June 23 meeting to recommend a policy for allocating new water service, but since its formation, that mission has both grown and blurred — and not without community dissent.

"I didn't vote on the formation," said Cliff Trotter, task force member and NCS D director. "Katcho (Achadjian, the district's county supervisor) just created that thing. My version of what it should've done is recommend a method of restricting water use."

The task force's membership grew to include two members of the Nipomo Community Advisory Council — which will share task force opinions with the county — and Jerry Bunin, a representative from the Home Builders Association of the Central Coast.

But in its effort to address the questions of the county and NCS D in one jump, the task force thwarted its own effort to come up with a clear water service recommendation.

"There absolutely is not any kind of agreement on any of these," said Mike Winn, task force chair and NCS D board president.

Examples of disagreements are not hard to find.

"At this point in time, there isn't a (water overdraft) problem, in my estimation, from looking at the different reports," said John Brantingham, a task force and NCAC member and a local real estate agent. "Does that mean that there will be one developing? No."

Trotter disagrees: "There's an overwhelming evidence that there is overdraft. And every bit of testimony that contradicted that was biased testimony from developers that don't want to hear the word 'overdraft.'"

Winn acknowledged that any task force recommendation now would be diluted by the three members who

The 'definitive' study

The state Department of Water Resources began a study called "Water Resources of the Arroyo Grande-Nipomo Mesa Area" in 1992. Ten years later, the final report left county officials scratching their heads.

"There's this problem with DWR," said John Hand, senior county planner. "The data that they present seem to lead to the conclusion that the extraction (of water on the Mesa) is in excess of (the basin's) sustainable yield, but in their narrative conclusion they claim that there is no overdraft."

From the years 1984 to 1995, the DWR found, there was an average outflow of 8,200 acre-feet of water per



CONSTRUCTION WOES — New construction development is on its way to Nipomo, but the task force wades through five reports and a

year and an inflow of 6,800 acre-feet per year — an average loss of 1,400 acre-feet annually.

Based on current zoning and rate of growth, the report predicted outflow could exceed inflow by 2,400 acre-feet in 2010 and 3,800 acre-feet in 2020.

(An acre-foot is equal to about 326,000 gallons, or enough to meet the average yearly water needs of two families of three.)

The glossary of the same report defined overdraft as "the condition of a groundwater basin or subbasin in which the amount of water withdrawn by pumping exceeds the amount of water that recharges the basin over a period of years."

However, the report concludes, "This study refrains from finding that the Santa Maria Groundwater Basin within San Luis Obispo County is currently in overdraft because of consistent subsurface outflow to the ocean and no evidence of sea-water intrusion," specifically rejecting a statement of overdraft for the Mesa as well.

"The main author (of the report) died, so we didn't have that resource to go back to about this discrepancy," said Christine Ferrara, a county Public Works Department engineer.

"By 2002, that basin was in the throes of the litigation," she added. "DWR approached it gingerly. They were very, very cautious about coming to conclusions."

The Santa Maria groundwater lawsuit, first filed in

don't know if you're a hydrologist," said Jeff Robinson, lawyer for the large Woodlands development, addressing the task force. "You have very little ability to weigh and judge conflicting reports."

The court found no evidence of physical harm due to overdraft, such as a decline in water quality, sea-water intrusion or ground subsidence.

"A whole litany of horrors have not occurred, but is that really a determination of overdraft?" asked Jon Seitz, NCS D's legal counsel.

The court still must determine the basin's safe yield — the amount that can be safely withdrawn per year while maintaining the basin's equilibrium — and how that yield should be divvied up, a ruling no utility board or government agency will be able to ignore.

Other reports

If the DWR report is confusing and the court's judgment half-finished, the water task force can choose from a number of other reports.

The Woodlands developer's 1998 study claims water losses from the development's pumping will decrease with time as water flows in from the Santa Maria Valley, but those findings are limited, failing to account for urban growth beyond the development.

Another report used by NCS D in the water lawsuit clearly states the basin is in overdraft, estimating a deficit of 4,080 acre-feet per year by 2020.

"I think it can all be

ing studies cloud the answer to Nipomo's future



Adobe/Michael A. Mariani

CONSTRUCTION WOES — New construction development is on hold as the NCSO has stopped all new promises for future water service while the task force wades through five reports and a court ruling to determine just how much water is available.

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Water storage changes in Nipomo Mesa subbasin

■ Three different reports were produced to estimate the amount of water the basin lowers each year — both past averages and projections. But each report used different dates, resulting in differing data.

AFY = acre feet per year
(XX) = deficiency, or negative change in storage

Woodlands Development's Environmental Impact Report
Cleathe and Associates, 1998

Average	1777-1992	(193 AFY)
(phase I)	1992-2008	(275 AFY)
(phase II)	2008-2024	(82 AFY)
(phase III)	2024-2040	(60 AFY)

State of California Department of Water Resources
Water Resources of the Arroyo Grande - Nipomo Mesa Area, 2002

Average	1984-1995	(1,400 AFY)
Annual	2010	(2,400 AFY)
Annual	2020	(3,800 AFY)

Science Applications International Corporation
NCSO Hydrologic Inventory for Nipomo Mesa Sub-basin, 2003

Average	1975-1995	(1,100 AFY)
Annual	2000	(4,660 AFY)
Annual	2020	(4,080 AFY)

(report) that was going to be a definitive explanation," he added.

A March 2004 report — commissioned by the county in response to its confusion over the DWR study — analyzes the plethora of studies out there already and concludes: "The Nipomo Mesa portion of the Santa Maria

urban and agricultural growth," said Ferrara. "We can with confidence advise our board that the time of some action to be taken with growth ... is imminent."

However, the county cannot control water use. Only such suppliers as NCSO can encourage water conservation.

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Examples of disagreements are not hard to find.

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Trotter disagrees: "There's an overwhelming evidence that there is overdraft. And every bit of testimony that contradicted that was biased testimony from developers that don't want to hear the word 'overdraft.'"

Winn acknowledged that any task force recommendation now would be diluted by the three members who are not NCSD customers or board members. Thus, the task force will come to no formal consensus.

"Time is slipping away," said Ed Eby, an NCSD customer and member of the environmentalist group Save the Mesa. "Our water shortage is only getting worse. They're likely to continue to commit to new customers from a water supply that's in question. I think they need to come up with a new intent-to-serve policy as quick as possible."

Trotter and Winn will share their own personal opinions based on task force discussion and expert testimony at the next NCSD meeting July 28. Intent-to-serve letters will start being issued again on the same day, according to Winn.

"It (the task force) turned out all right," said Trotter. "I think the main value of that was education, because certainly there weren't any decisions made."

Staff writer Kirsten Flagg can be reached at 739-2206 or kflagg@pulitzer.net.

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Some argue the task force should give more weight to the court's "no overdraft" ruling than to any single study because of the court's authority in judging the credibility of its many expert witnesses.

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Another report used by NCSD in the water lawsuit clearly states the basin is in overdraft, estimating a deficit of 4,080 acre-feet per year by 2020.

"I think it can all be summed up fairly clearly," said Jesse Hill, a lawyer for small land owners in the groundwater litigation. "It's pick a period, pick a result. Pick an area, pick a result. Pick an expert and you pick a conclusion."

In other words, anyone can find a way to come up with whatever conclusion he wants.

"I think a lot of us made a faulty assumption that it was going to be the DWR




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Annual 2020 (3,800 AFY)

Science Applications International Corporation

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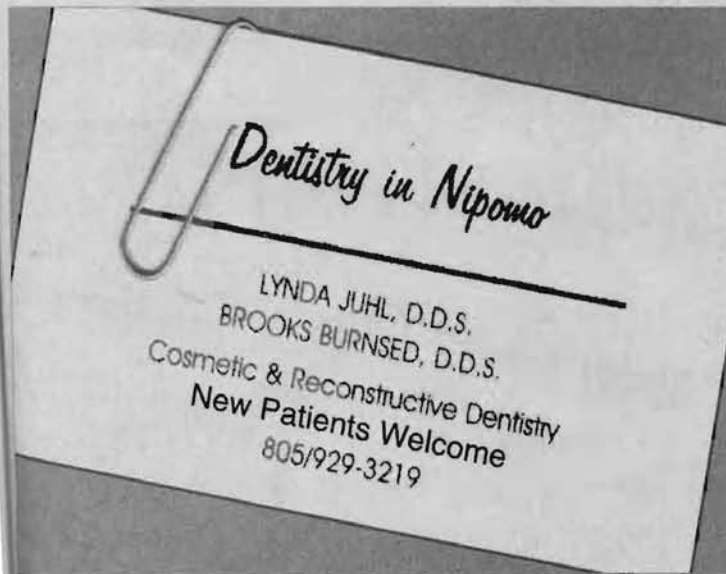
"There is one consistency among all the data, and that is that if this basin is not in overdraft right now, it is certain to be soon with all the

urban and agricultural growth," said Ferrara. "We can with confidence advise our board that the time of some action to be taken with growth ... is imminent."

However, the county cannot control water use. Only such suppliers as NCS D can encourage water conservation.

The water task force is just one step in a process that may end eventually at the Santa Clara County Superior Court, whose final ruling on safe yield will clinch the fate of the Mesa and its water.

Staff writer Kirsten Flagg can be reached at 739-2206 or kflagg@pulitzer.net.



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