

Planners agree water supply in overdraft

By Todd Cralley/STAFF WRITER

In a unanimous vote Thursday, the San Luis Obispo County Planning Commission backed the Nipomo Community Services District's request that the County Board of Supervisors declare a Severity Level 3 for the Nipomo Mesa water supply and immediately implement strict conservation measures.

A Severity Level 3 means the demand for water meets or exceeds the supply in the groundwater basin.

The vote is in direct response to an NCSO-commissioned report by Science Applications International Corp. that shows several wells tested in April in the Nipomo Mesa Management Area have been pumping water from below sea level.

It's those depressions in the underground aquifer that concern NCSO directors. Eight of the 63 wells tested were drawing water from below sea level, according to the report.

That can pose a problem because it could allow sea water to intrude on the groundwater basin, which could ruin the quality of the water supply.

The volume of groundwater in storage above sea level last month was determined to be 90,000 acre-feet, a drop of 12,000 acre-feet from last year's total of 102,000 acre-feet, and that has some concerned.

"The biggest concern is, the dramatic drop in storage over the last 12 months shows how vulnerable we are," said Bruce Buel, NCSO general manager.

A substantial lack of rainfall in the area has had an effect on the amount of water that normally recharges the underground aquifer. There has been a 40-percent decrease in the amount of rain this year.

Typically, Nipomo receives about 16 inches of precipitation a year. This year's total of just over six inches falls well short of a normal year.

NCSO is committed to managing the water wisely.

"Water is our single greatest resource," said Mike Winn, board president. "If they start pumping salt water out of those wells, farming on the Mesa is through. Think of the greenhouses. They'd be ruined. Those flowers go not just locally but all over the country, and some ship around the world."

The Planning Commission also agreed areas outside the urban reserve line, those areas of Nipomo that are truly rural and not served by NCSO, should be charged for the cost of securing a supplemental water supply.

"Until a supplemental water in-lieu fee is in place, the county should not be approving divisions of land outside the urban resource line," Buel said. "In particular, you don't want development occurring in rural areas without the mechanism in place to bill them for the supplemental water."

Said Winn, "The Planning Commission's recommendation to the Board of Supervisors is that they stop processing outside the (urban reserve line) until they know what that fee will be."

NCSD charges a \$12,000 fee for supplemental water for each development it agrees to serve.

“Outside the urban resource line, I can't charge them \$12,000,” Buel said. “Before new development is approved, the county must change that.”

NCSD is also seeking assistance from the county in monitoring the wells, because certain constraints have been identified by the district.

“Getting to the wells is often a difficult process, because there are permits and endangered species,” said Jon Seitz, NCSD legal counsel. “We're asking the county to contribute to the process of monitoring the wells on a regular basis.”

NCSD wants to use an electronic monitoring system that is capable of checking the wells hourly.

Planning Commissioner Sarah Christie said it is better to act now before it is too late.

“It's better that we address this concern now,” she said. “The Nipomo Community Service District knows what's best for the Nipomo area. They have hired professionals to complete this study. We should act now before we regret not acting in the future.”

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