

County certifies severity of Nipomo water issue

By April Charlton/Senior Staff Writer

A move Tuesday by the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors to certify a Level 3 severity for water on the Nipomo Mesa still won't stop growth in the area.

In 2005, the supervisors raised the severity from Level 2 to Level 3 based on the belief that demand for water on the Mesa is exceeding supply, but they didn't enact a building moratorium at that time.

And with Tuesday's lengthy discussion - almost four hours of testimony and debate - it doesn't look like the supervisors will halt growth on the Mesa within the urban reserve line anytime soon - in part because it would force development into rural areas.

James Caruso, county planner, said the request for certification was a direct response to various conditions that have changed in Nipomo since last year's hearing on the annual Resource Management Summary Report and the prior adoption of the Level 3.

The county's Resource Management Summary report is intended to provide the supervisors and its Planning Commission with a clear picture of the county's resources, such as water, and how much of a certain resource exists.

"You set this hearing based on those chain of circumstances," Caruso said, adding one recent change is the Nipomo Community Services District no longer has a supplemental water project on tap.

NCSD had planned to buy supplemental water from the city of Santa Maria for future demands; however, the cost of the project recently skyrocketed from \$6 million to \$24 million, making it too cost-prohibitive to proceed.

When the supervisors adopted the Level 3 severity, they also made it a requirement that all General Plan amendments on the Mesa have supplemental water.

With certification, Caruso told the supervisors, they "have to move up, and you have to have some real on-the-ground changes," like conserving more water on the Mesa through retrofitting fixtures in existing homes.

"This is a situation not made to solve very easily," Caruso added about steps and actions the board has to take to back up the Level 3 severity certification.

The supervisors also directed staff to establish a water retrofit program for existing homes on the Mesa that will be paid for by new development in the same area.

Additional conservation measures were also recommended when the supervisors adopted the Level 3 severity recommendation in 2005.

The NCSD board was also directed to come back to the supervisors in the middle of October to report on the status of a supplemental water supply for the district.

A Level 2 severity means a resource's demand will exceeds its supply in seven years, while a Level 1

severity is where demand will exceed supply in nine years.

Level 3 means demand is already exceeding supply.

April Charlton can be reached at 489-4206, Ext. 5016, or

acharlton@santamariatimes.com.

June 27, 2007