

Nipomo weighs water options

By Glenn Wallace/Staff Writer

Water issues weighed heavily on the Nipomo Community Services District Wednesday.

The NCSD board's agenda included discussions of water conservation, water shortage regulations, and the possibility of building a desalination plant to provide supplemental water to the community.

The district's Conservation and Public Outreach Specialist Celeste Whitlow laid out the case for conservation: The Nipomo Mesa aquifer is acutely overdrawn, State Water Project availability is uncertain and will be expensive, and other potential sources of water such as a desalination plant could cost more than \$79 million and not be built until 2014. Conserved water could be immediately available, and used at very low cost.

The district cited the conservation successes of other places, including San Luis Obispo.

“Our problem is we haven't even started,” said District President Michael Winn, who helped craft the program as part of an ad hoc committee.

The rough draft of the program put some board members into disagreement about whether a three-tier billing system would be effective.

“We've voted down a three- or four-tier system twice in the past,” said district director Ed Eby.

Eby argued that the current two-tier water billing system could work with the conservation program, and that the program's goal of a 15-percent water usage reduction seemed arbitrary.

He was joined in his opposition by director James Harrison, who said he felt the three-tier system could unfairly burden single-family residences on larger lots.

Most of the program received complete board approval, but Eby and Harrison deadlocked with Winn and Larry Vierheilg over the three-tier issue. Director Clifford Trotter was absent for the issue.

To us, that is the heart of the program,” General Manager Bruce Buel said of a three-tier system. Staff research indicated the three-tier billing system would help conservation efforts, he added.

The conservation program is scheduled to return for a public hearing Nov. 14, and Buel said that three-tier billing would be part of the proposed program. That apparently would put Trotter on the spot to break the deadlock.

A conservation program could help Nipomo avoid an emergency water shortage. The details of what triggers an emergency shortage, and what restrictions then occur, were also discussed at the meeting.

The rough draft of the Emergency Water Shortage Regulations would update a 1992 ordinance, adding a new method of determining trigger points and serious enforcement tools.

The draft lays out four levels of emergency, ranging from a level one “water watch” to a level four “extreme water emergency.” At stage four, the community would attempt to cut water use by half, with

specific gallons-per-day limits on residences. No potable water could be used for irrigation, and new water hook-ups would be placed on hold.

Applied retroactively over the last 27 years, the triggers would have placed Nipomo at level four for 14 of those years.

“We still need quite a bit of work on the triggers,” said Buel, describing the document as still very much in progress.

Buel said a near constant state of rationing water was not a desired outcome of the new regulations, and that further study on the trigger points would be done.

Instead of rainfall, used by the old ordinance, the proposed emergency shortage regulations look at decreases in the Nipomo Mesa aquifer to trigger an emergency.

Each spring the county's measurement of the aquifer level would be used by the Nipomo District. A June public hearing would be held to announce the findings and any appropriate emergency shortage regulations. Monthly water bills would be used by the district to notify each property owner of required usage restrictions.

Violators could face surcharges upwards of 500 percent. Repeat offenders could have their water shut off by the fourth violation. The regulation includes the option of charging violators with a misdemeanor, punishable by a \$1,000 fine and six months in jail.

Trotter said he had concerns about some of the agricultural water restrictions included in the document.

“Put restrictions on row crops, that's a one-year impact. Restrict water for permanent crops and you could wipe somebody out,” he said.

Buel said the intention of staff was to eventually have all users of the aquifer adopt the emergency shortage regulations. Individuals within the NCSD borders comprise about 30 percent of aquifer users. When that adoption by other users would occur was unknown.

“We're talking about 30 percent of the people going through some draconian methods to save the water for the other 70 percent of the people who take water on the mesa,” said Eby, stating he did not intend to support the eventual final draft of the regulations without wider adoption.

The emergency shortage regulation will be revised, and is scheduled to return to the board Dec. 12 for further discussion.

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