

Nipomo still thirsts for water

By Glenn Wallace/Staff Writer

Water issues weighed heavily on the Nipomo Community Services District board, which on Wednesday discussed water conservation, water shortage regulations and the possibility of building a desalination plant.

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 availability is uncertain and expensive and a desalination plant could cost more than \$79 million and not be built until 2014.

Conserved water could be immediately available at very low cost, she said.

"Our problem is we haven't even started (on a conservation program)," said board President Michael Winn, who helped craft the program as part of an ad hoc committee.

The rough draft of the program led 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 Director Ed Eby, who argued the current two-tier billing system could work with the conservation program and the 15-percent water use reduction goal seemed arbitrary.

Director James Harrison agreed and said 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 Director Larry Vierheilg over the three-tier issue. Director Clifford Trotter was absent.

"To us, that is the heart of the program," General Manager Bruce Buel said of a three-tier system.

The conservation program is scheduled to return for a public hearing Nov. 14, and Buel said three-tier billing would be part of the proposal.

The rough draft of the Emergency Water Shortage Regulations would update a 1992 ordinance, adding a new method of determining trigger points for declaring water shortage emergencies 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.

Instead of rainfall used by the old ordinance, the proposed 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 NCSD. The findings and any appropriate emergency regulations would be announced in a June public hearing and through monthly water bills.

Violators could face surcharges upwards of 500 percent. Water could be shut off for a 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.

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

gwallace@timespressrecorder.com