

## County studying fee for Nipomo projects

By April Charlton/Adobe Press

County planning staff is moving a step closer to developing a fee that will be charged to new development on the Nipomo Mesa to help finance supplemental water for the community.

On Tuesday, the county Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to have staff proceed with a study to determine how new development will affect the groundwater basin and how much it's basin supplies currently are deficient.

The study is expected to be completed by January, and the new fee will be based on an estimated \$80-million desalination project that the Nipomo Community Services District will likely undertake in the future.

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

The district has also said that the water source from Santa Maria — a portion of the city's state water entitlement — wasn't reliable.

"The ocean represents for us the only reliable ... sustainable water that we can get," NCSD President Mike Winn told the supervisors.

To meet current and future needs, Nipomo needs an estimated 6,300 acre-feet of additional water annually.

Earlier this year, the supervisors certified a Level 3 severity for water on the Nipomo Mesa, which means that demand for the resource is already exceeding supply.

At that time, the board felt a building moratorium for the area wasn't appropriate to deal with the water shortage, which was reiterated during Tuesday's meeting.

Fifth District Supervisor Jim Patterson said the board should take the word "moratorium" off the table until it's known how Nipomo will get supplemental water and at what cost.

However, he also cautioned the board to not wait too long to take aggressive action with regards to Nipomo's water situation so that the community doesn't wind up like Los Osos or Cambria.

"We are already behind the curve here," Patterson said. "We need to be as assertive as possible here to find a solution, and I don't want to give up on looking for an interim solution."

It's conservatively estimated that it will take at least 10 years to see a desalination plant come to fruition in Nipomo, according to district consultants.

Because of the amount time it will take for Nipomo to get supplemental water, the supervisors also directed staff to draft strict water-conservation ordinances for the Mesa. Those ordinances are expected to come back for approval at the end of January.

Fourth District Supervisor Katcho Achadjian said he was eager to get a supplemental water fee established for new development in Nipomo.

The supervisors can't set a supplemental water fee until the study is complete and the NCSD has a supplemental water project on tap.

NCSD General Manager Bruce Buel told the supervisors the board was likely going to move forward with initiating a desalination project next month.