

## Water shapes governmental directions

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor

Water might not have been a topic of interest for every southern San Luis Obispo County citizen in 2007, but it was certainly on the minds of politicians, government employees, agriculturists and developers.

Specifically, it was the growing shortage of water and how to find more that kept their minds occupied during a year in which rainfall ranged from 20 percent to 45 percent below normal.

Relentless growth in the South County left Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach worried about how to maintain the flow of water, while Nipomo floundered about trying to find more and prevent sea water from intruding on the dwindling aquifer.

Pismo Beach officials, confident their city has enough water for full buildout, weren't worried, and Oceano Community Services District officials saw a chance to boost the budget by considering "leasing" some of the district's excess supply.

The county recertified its water-supply danger level, various agencies called for voluntary water conservation, consumers' water rates rose and developers worried the dreaded words "building moratorium" might surface.

Although not banned, new development slowed, as all new projects were required to bring with them supplemental water sources.

Along the way, a complex judgment was finally handed down in the decades-old Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin lawsuit that left some parties happy, some unhappy and others simply confused.

Perhaps most concerned about the shortage of water were Nipomo Community Services District directors, who last year balked at buying supplemental water from Santa Maria when the pipeline cost estimate ballooned from \$6 million to \$27 million.

The district then launched an investigation into alternatives, specifically tapping into the State Water Project and building a desalination plant.

After a year of studies, the district decided to put the state water plan on the back burner, renegotiate the purchase of water from Santa Maria and pursue a desalination project as a long-term solution.

At the same time, the district began developing regulations for dealing with water-shortage emergencies. That plan will be among the first issues the district faces in the new year.

NCSD officials also hired a lobbying firm to help the district find federal funding for supplemental water projects and applied for a state grant to monitor the basin and develop supplemental sources.

San Luis Obispo County supervisors also launched a study of the groundwater basin and how it's affected by development as a precursor to creating a fee on all new development to pay for supplemental water.

While NCS D forged ahead on its own desalination plan, Arroyo Grande, Grover Beach and Oceano formed an alliance to investigate the construction of a separate desal plant at the South County Wastewater Treatment Plant in Oceano.

Grover Beach, which is using 96 percent of its supply, declared a Level 1 water shortage and asked residents to voluntarily stop hosing down driveways and sidewalks, washing cars without recycling the water and using nonrecirculating ornamental fountains.

Arroyo Grande, which is using 97 percent of its supply, tested a new water well, called for voluntary conservation and continued its retrofit program that provides free low-flow toilets and shower heads.

City officials said they plan to extend the retrofit program to landscaping that reduces turf and increases irrigation efficiency, and all agencies asked homeowners to replace thirsty landscaping with drought-tolerant plants.

#### Why it's important

While the rainy season began with some promise of more rain than last year, long-range weather forecasters say a La Niña condition in the Pacific Ocean could lead to another year of drought.

But even if 2007-08 is a "wet year," the South County is faced with the prospect of ever-dwindling supplies, with the groundwater basin already in overdraft and no end in sight for the area's rapid growth.

The decisions made this year and in years to come will determine the future health of the area's economy, society and environment.

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