

Technical group urges plan to manage Nipomo groundwater

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor

Nipomo Mesa water purveyors should develop a program to deal with a severe water shortage because the potential for that already exists, according to the first report issued by the group tasked with monitoring groundwater levels.

That program could range from mandatory conservation measures to declaring a moratorium on issuing intent-to-serve and will-serve letters for providing water to new developments.

But it's only one of a host of recommendations made in the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group's 2008 annual report.

Members of the group delivered a user-friendly, nontechnical outline of the report to about two dozen people Monday night in the Nipomo High School Forum.

While the report recommends developing a plan for mandatory conservation and well management, group members also admitted there is much they don't know about the groundwater basin.

They said it may take years of study to answer questions that swirl around the basin, ranging from how much rainwater percolates into it to its safe yield.

"We're in a potentially severe water shortage because the spring water levels declined for the last two years," said professional engineer Rob Miller, who represents The Woodlands on the group and serves as its chair.

He said the group determined groundwater levels dropped below 31.5 feet above mean sea level in spring 2008 and 2009 measurements taken at eight key monitoring wells.

As a result, voluntary conservation measures have already been called for by Nipomo Community Services District, the largest water purveyor in the management area, and other water companies.

But a mandatory plan applying to all of the Mesa's water purveyors should be developed now, according to the report.

Miller said the 31.5-foot level was established as a "trigger point" to give water purveyors time to develop mandatory conservation measures before a severe shortage occurs.

"We set the triggers to allow one to two years to respond," he said.

The drop to 28.7 feet in spring 2008 appears to be part of a general trend of declining groundwater levels, according to the report.

If the average groundwater level in the monitoring wells continues to drop and falls below 16.5 feet above mean sea level, the area would be in a severe water shortage, based on the technical group's criteria.

That's when the mandatory measures would kick in.

"A severe water shortage would exist if the lowest historical water levels as a whole are reached or we have a condition of seawater intrusion," Miller said.

Seawater intrusion would make the groundwater unusable where the salt-laden water penetrates the basin, although at present there is no indication that is occurring.

But once it does, it's virtually impossible to reverse, said professional geologist Steve Bachman, who represents ConocoPhillips on the technical group.

“We do have a condition that would allow that if we’re not careful and cautious about our management of the basin,” Miller said, noting the groundwater basin extends out under the Pacific Ocean.

The group uses two coastal monitoring wells to check for seawater intrusion. A third well located near Oso Flaco Lake has been buried under shifting sands and can’t be located, so the group is recommending that a new well be drilled in that area to improve monitoring.

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