



AG declares moratorium on building

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Uncertainties about water supplies and the potential for saltwater intrusion in the groundwater basin has prompted Arroyo Grande to declare a moratorium on approving new developments.

An urgency ordinance approved Tuesday will halt project approvals for 45 days, but city staff said it's likely the moratorium will be extended, possibly for six months.

City Council members, also sitting as the Redevelopment Agency board, approved the ordinance on a 4-0 vote, with Councilman Ed Arnold absent.

In a related action, the council authorized the mayor to sign a joint letter from the city, Grover Beach, Pismo Beach and Oceano asking the county to make its excess state water allocation available at the Lopez turnout on a temporary emergency basis.

"Arroyo Grande can't use (state water) without a public vote, but neighboring jurisdictions could, and that might allow Arroyo Grande to increase its pumping allowance," City Manager Steve Adams said.

The council also directed the staff to gather public input to prepare recommendations on how to address a growing water shortage and to obtain additional data on the potential saltwater intrusion.

Adams said that might take considerable time, which is why the moratorium will likely be extended.

"The entire water problem is a real mosaic," Mayor Pro Tem Joe Costello said. "It's significant enough and important enough to take the time to do it right."

Adams said the moratorium will not affect projects already in the pipeline that have been deemed complete and ready for approval, nor will it affect projects that require upgrading existing water meters.

However, it will affect any project that requires a new water meter, he said.

Developers still will be able to submit project applications, and the staff will work with them to get their projects ready, but the process will halt once the proposals reach the approval point.

Because many questions are expected from developers, Adams said the staff will be briefed on the moratorium's provisions, information sheets will be prepared, a press release will be issued and information will be posted on the city's Web site.

Arroyo Grande has been struggling with a dwindling water supply for a couple of years now.

In 2008, the city was found to be using 99 percent of its groundwater allocation, prompting the declaration of a "severely restricted water supply" and a call for voluntary conservation by residents.

Adams said that shortage has been "dramatically magnified recently by groundwater monitoring and tests" that showed potential saltwater intrusion.

"We do want to emphasize 'potential,'" Adams said. "We're concerned about the accuracy of the tests."

Those tests on a so-called "sentinel well" in Oceano, conducted in May and August by the Northern Cities Management Area Technical Group as part of the settlement in the Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin litigation, showed chlorides, sodium and

potassium at the lower levels rose dramatically.

For example, measured chlorides rose from 97 to 190 milligrams per liter at the middle layer and from 175 to 500 mg/l at the deepest layer. The Environmental Protection Agency's maximum allowed level of chloride in drinking water is 500 mg/l.

However, the well and other sentinel wells, drilled in the 1960s to monitor saltwater intrusion, have not been monitored consistently, and this one was apparently last checked in 1996.

Officials are uncertain of the accuracy of the tests, where the increased levels of salts came from, whether a seasonal fluctuation is normal and how long the levels may have been rising.

Saltwater intrusion in groundwater basins near the ocean generally results from overpumping the basin, causing sea water to seep in to fill the void.

That can have a devastating impact on water supplies, because where saltwater invades a groundwater basin, the water becomes undrinkable. Once saltwater intrudes on a basin, it's almost impossible to remove.

"At this point, I don't think there's a lot to debate or discuss ... but we better be ready if there is saltwater intrusion," Councilman Chuck Fellows said.