

## Groundwater level falls for third year

*By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor*

The Nipomo Mesa groundwater level dropped for the third-straight year, but the decline has flattened somewhat, according to a second report on the state of the basin.

While the aquifer remains in a potentially severe water shortage condition, it is still more than 11 feet above the level that would actually trigger a severe water shortage declaration, according to the report from the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group.

“It’s not so urgent that we need to stop using water and let our lawns die,” group Chairman Robert S. Miller told a small audience Sept. 23 when five of the seven technical group members gathered at Nipomo High School to explain the report and answer questions.

The average groundwater level fell from 28.7 feet above sea level in spring 2008 to 28.1 feet in spring 2009, according to the report.

The level was about 32 feet above sea level in spring 2007 and about 45 feet in spring 2006.

Miller also said that, at present, there is no indication of saltwater intrusion in the basin, the other condition that would trigger a severe water shortage declaration.

He said the chlorides detected in two coastal sentry wells “are about half of what we see in normal drinking water standards.”

A “pumping depression” — where the groundwater level is lower than the rest of the basin — still exists in the Woodlands and Blacklake area.

Although the level in the depression is above sea level in the spring, it falls up to

10 feet below sea level in the fall, when overall levels are lowest following a summer of heavy pumping.

Miller said the area between the depression and the ocean will require careful monitoring, but so far coastal wells don't show a downward trend.

"What that says is we have strong, consistent levels at the coast," he said.

At present, an estimated 12,200 acre-feet of water is being pumped from the basin each year.

About 8,400 acre-feet of that is used by residential and industrial customers, with about 3,800 acre-feet used by agricultural operations.

An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons, or the amount of water generally considered to supply the annual needs of four to 10 people in an urban environment.

But exactly how much the basin can safely yield is not an easy question to answer, Miller said.

"Safe yield is not a number this technical group can publish this night," he said. "That's something we hope to develop in the future."

One of the group's recommendations is to continue studying the basin to understand its hydrogeology, establishing true surface levels and analyzing stream flow and how that recharges the basin.

Other recommendations include implementing the project to bring supplemental water to the Mesa from Santa Maria and developing a well management plan among water purveyors.

The group also recommends changing monitoring points and methods, installing automatic data collection equipment and encouraging private well users to supply pumping data.