



No seawater intrusion detected

Report: Nipomo groundwater 'potentially severe'

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Although the level of the Nipomo Mesa Groundwater Basin rebounded slightly in spring 2010, the water supply remains in a potentially severe condition, according to a recently released technical group report.

However, there is no indication saltwater is intruding on the subsurface pool, the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group said in its third annual report.

"We look at this as analogous to a yellow light," group chairman Robert Miller told about two dozen people who gathered Sept. 15 at Nipomo High School to hear a summary of the 2010 report.

Although chloride levels have not reached 250 milligrams per liter at coastal sentinel wells, indicating possible saltwater intrusion, the average level in eight key inland wells is still below 31.5 feet above sea level.

That means the groundwater basin remains in a potentially severe condition, which requires water purveyors to augment the supply.

A severe condition would be declared if the overall level passed the historic low of 16.5 feet and chloride levels hit 500 milligrams per liter.

"That is our red light," Miller said of the triggers for a severe condition.

But he noted more study is needed to assess the basin's health.

"We are unable to characterize the condition of our water basin because of a number of uncertainties (regarding) conditions underground," Miller told the audience.

"We can't characterize it because we don't have enough information to do that," he said, adding, "Our goal is always to reduce uncertainty."

After three years of steady decline, the spring 2010 water level rose slightly following a wet rainy season, according to the report.

But responding to a question from Nipomo Community Services District Director Ed Eby, Miller said it appears the level declined again this spring, despite another wet rainy season.

He estimated the drop at about 1 foot, but technical group member Brad Newton said it dropped from 29.3 feet to 25.3 feet above sea level in eight key wells.

That data is not in the 2010 report but will be part of the 2011 report to be released next year.

Miller said similar conditions were observed in 1992, when the level didn't rise after a wet year.

"It's too early to call this a trend, but it's something to be concerned about," he said. "Some areas have seen a significant increase, but some levels have not. But the average has gone down."

As a result of its 2010 findings, the group recommends implementing the proposed supplemental water project pipeline between Santa Maria and the Mesa.

Bill Petrick, a member of the Mesa Community Alliance that opposes the pipeline, noted there is no data in the report to support that recommendation.

Miller responded that the technical group must recommend that some supplemental water project be undertaken if the groundwater basin is in a potentially severe condition.

But he said it's up to Nipomo Mesa water purveyors to decide what that project will be.

"The supplemental water project is likely the fastest way to reduce pumping from the Mesa," Miller said.

Other recommendations include installing automatic data collection systems on some monitoring wells, developing a well management plan and encouraging all private well owners to provide data on their wells.

The group also recommends analyzing stream flow, further defining the basin's hydrogeology and determining the costs and benefits of creating a model of how the basin functions.

The Nipomo Mesa Technical Group was formed as part of a stipulated settlement in a lawsuit over rights to water in the Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin.

The group monitors the Nipomo Mesa basin, a subarea of the larger basin that extends from southeast of Santa Maria to Grover Beach and Arroyo Grande.