



Pipeline opponents cite letter as proof

District denies saltwater intrusion

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor mhodgson@santamariatimes.com | Posted: Saturday, February 18, 2012 12:15 am

A letter from Oceano Community Services District saying the South County's groundwater supply is not threatened by saltwater intrusion is being cited by supplemental water pipeline opponents as proof that the aquifer is not in danger.

The letter to the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors, unanimously approved last week by OCSD directors, was written for the board's review of the draft Countywide Master Water Plan on Tuesday.

Tom Geaslen, interim general manager of OCSD, said the letter was sparked by claims of impending saltwater intrusion being made by local agencies and individuals.

"Everyone and their brother uses it to their own benefit," Geaslen said.

But he pointed out the claims are based on tests conducted in 2009 on a sentry well - one of several used to detect saltwater intrusion - that was in a serious state of disrepair.

Tests conducted on the well in May and August that year by the Northern Cities Management Area Technical Group showed chlorides, sodium and potassium levels rose dramatically.

Scientists consider increases in those chemicals in groundwater basins near the ocean to indicate possible saltwater intrusion.

But Geaslen said the well is the shallowest of the sentry wells, was poorly sealed and secured and is located near a walking path and a homeless camp.

"It was also very close to the (Oceano) lagoon and close to the beach, so there were extenuating circumstances as well," he said.

Once the sentry well was repaired and sealed to prevent contamination, the sodium, chloride and potassium levels dropped and have not increased again, Geaslen said.

He said he reported the chronology of tests and results to the OCSD board in December, and directors instructed him to draft the letter relaying that information to supervisors.

"We normally would have accepted (the claims) without comment, but the level of exploitation of this anomaly has reached critical mass ... ," the letter says.

The letter indicates test results showing elevated chemical levels are being quoted by other agencies to support their needs and by individuals to block commercial developments.

It also refers to the claims as "willful suspensions of the truth."

Nipomo Community Services District has cited the test results, as well as saltwater intrusion in Los Osos, as evidence of the potential for saltwater intrusion if the groundwater basin is overpumped.

It's one of the arguments NCSO is using to support the proposed pipeline that would bring water to the Nipomo Mesa from Santa Maria.

Members of Mesa Community Alliance, a group of Nipomo area residents opposing the pipeline, claim the OCSD letter "blatantly refutes this argument."

The group accuses NCSO of "not telling the entire story" and misleading voters in brochures and town hall meetings to get approval of the assessment district to pay for the pipeline.

"We have studied the issue for a long time and are convinced that the NCSD is using a tightly controlled, PR-firm-driven campaign to convince Mesa residents to support this project," MCA member Arlene Versaw said.

Other issues they say NCSD has not included in brochures and meetings are two significant negative impacts that the pipeline environmental impact report says can't be mitigated to an insignificant level.

The EIR says removing the development constraints imposed by a lack of adequate water will have impacts on population growth and housing.

MCA members say NCSD has separated the pipeline construction cost from the water purchase cost to make customers comfortable with the tax increase.

They also say NCSD has avoided answering questions about what will happen to the supply when drought conditions prevent Santa Maria from receiving its full allocation of state water.

In addition, MCA charges that NCSD has not funded a hydrology study of the impact additional pumping will have on the aquifer, even though the study was recommended by the Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group and the court in the groundwater basin litigation.