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South SLO County's water conservation plans are kicking into high gear

BY RHYS HEYDEN

Seeing as the emergency in the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin and the dire water situations in coastal Cambria and Morro Bay have drawn a lot of attention, some locals might be surprised to learn that Southern San Luis Obispo County has water issues of its own.

While California's historically awful statewide drought is hardly breaking news, many South SLO County municipalities have taken bold steps in recent weeks to buck the nagging perception that they're somehow immune from water-related problems.

"There really is a drought down here, too," said Greg Ray, Grover Beach's public works director and city engineer. "Several of our water supplies are in danger, and so I think you're seeing South County cities being extremely proactive."

On June 10, the Arroyo Grande City Council elected to spend thousands of dollars to beef up the city's water use surveys, irrigation audits, and various water-saving rebate programs.

On June 16, the Grover Beach City Council declared a Stage III Water Shortage, which turned a number of voluntary water conservation measures into mandatory measures, including a mandatory 10 percent reduction by all customers.

On July 1, the Pismo Beach City Council declared a citywide Severely Restricted Water Supply Condition, bumping the drought condition up from the "moderately restricted" level it had declared a mere five months earlier.

Even in South County's major unincorporated communities—Nipomo and Oceano—water conservation requests are being actively sent out and strongly considered, respectively.

"We are in the middle of the worst drought in California's recorded history, so our message is 'conserve, conserve, conserve,'" said Ben Fine, Pismo Beach's public works

director and city engineer. “We have water resources now, but we want to keep them for the future, too.”

In Pismo Beach, Fine said that his city’s well-diversified water sources (state water, Lopez Lake, and groundwater) are reasonably secure in a cumulative sense, but added that the city is still being extremely cautious with its water management.

“Although we haven’t been able to use our surplus thus far, Lopez is stable for our regular allocation,” Fine said. “Deliveries for state water are lower than we’d like, obviously, and—though the groundwater wells are viable—the basin levels are low, so we are pumping as minimally as possible.”

Pismo’s July 1 declaration of a “severely restricted” water supply condition comes with conditions limiting outdoor water use in addition to banning automatic drinking water at restaurants and emptying/refilling swimming pools.

According to Fine, the city will continue several rebate programs and also strongly encourage its ratepayers to cut their water consumption as much as possible.

In Arroyo Grande, which relies on Lopez water and groundwater, the recent council action has boosted funding for programs that support drought-friendly yards, high-efficiency washing machines, low-flow toilets, aerators, and other such water saving ideas.

According to A.G. Public Works Director Geoff English, the city is aiming for a 20 percent reduction from 2000 water use levels by the year 2020. English said the city is on track to meet that goal, and is using a variety of strategies in the effort.

“We are in a heightened stage of planning and preparation right now,” English told the *Sun*. “We are looking at long-range solutions, especially if these drought conditions are going to be the new normal.”

In neighboring Grover Beach, which also relies on Lopez water and groundwater, the recently enacted Stage III Water Shortage declaration is widely considered to be the most severe response to drought conditions in South County.

Among the stipulations mandated by the declaration are the overall 10 percent reduction, the ban for many outdoor uses of potable water, and similar swimming pool restrictions to those in Pismo Beach.

“We are pushing conservation early and catching some of these trends before they become a problem,” Ray said. “Our goal is to conserve, not to punish, and we will work with users to achieve these necessary reductions.”

Ray added that plummeting groundwater levels (caused by lack of rainfall) in the city’s wells were what automatically triggered the Stage III declaration. As a result, the city will

be relying on its Lopez supply and conservation measures, moving away from groundwater as much as possible.

Nipomo is in the unique, unenviable position of being solely reliant on groundwater. As a result, Nipomo Community Services District (NCSD) General Manager Michael LeBrun said that his district is “in a tenuous situation, at best.”

“We are officially in a ‘potentially severe’ water condition in Nipomo,” LeBrun said. “That means we’re sending out strongly worded, but voluntary, conservation reminders to our customers, and conserving like mad from our end.”

LeBrun said he’s aiming for a 30 percent reduction in the NCSD area, and added that the drought has given his community the opportunity to “get everything in order” with their water laws and management.

“This is real, and we’d better all come together and fix this thing,” LeBrun said. “Conservation pays you back, and it’s just the right thing to do.”

Oceano—which is able to draw from groundwater, state water, and Lopez—has, in all likelihood, the strongest water supply in South County, according to Oceano CSD President Matt Guerrero.

“The water situation in South County is serious, but Oceano is relatively well situated,” Guerrero told the *Sun*. “That said, our supply is still threatened for various reasons: lack of rainfall, possible saltwater intrusion, and low state water deliveries.”

Guerrero said that the OCSD board of directors is considering sending out conservation mailers or putting up banners around town to encourage saving water, but has yet to officially decide.

“It’s dry, and we must plan for the possibility of continued drought,” Nipomo’s LeBrun said. “We can all do better, and, quite frankly, we all have to.”

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