

Water Planning in Santa Cruz County

Synopsis

Water issues are complex, controversial and extremely important in Santa Cruz County. Water discussions here are inevitably political, since many people equate more water with more growth.

This investigation focuses on how various water agencies are planning for the future. It looks at five water agencies in the county: the City of Santa Cruz Water Department and the City of Watsonville Public Works and Utilities Department, the Central and Soquel Creek water districts, and a basin-wide management agency, the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency.

The City of Santa Cruz water supply sources have not been expanded for twenty years. At the current rate of development, the city will run short of water in years of normal rainfall by 2015. Increased development within the service boundaries and the University of California at Santa Cruz's proposed addition of 6,000 new students will affect the city's water needs. Currently the city is proposing to build a desalination plant to increase water supply. However, the City Council's current plan would limit the size and production of the plant and routinely require water restrictions during dry years.

The City of Watsonville faces the major problems of seawater intrusion in its coastal wells and taking more water than can be replenished from its aquifer. Seawater intrusion makes the water salty and unusable. Taking too much water from the aquifer also contributes to seawater intrusion. A pipeline is proposed to bring water from the Central Valley for agricultural use. This would allow water normally used by agriculture to be diverted to residential use. An expanded plant to reclaim water so that it can be used for agriculture is also in progress.

Soquel Creek Water District is likewise suffering from seawater intrusion in its wells. It is also taking more water than can be replenished from its underground aquifer. The district has responded with several innovative programs to decrease water use. A new water supply is still needed. The district has investigated sharing water from the City of Santa Cruz's proposed desalination plant or from the City of Watsonville's pipeline project.

Central Water District serves a portion of the Aptos area and has adequate water to serve its primarily rural residential customers. It expects to have plenty of water for the future, unless the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors increases the density for development in the area.

The Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency is in charge of agricultural water use in the Pajaro River water basin. The basin includes parts of Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito counties. The agency has required farmers to install meters to measure the amount of water they take from the underground aquifer. The agency charges a volume-based fee

for water use. Farmers are suing the agency because the fees were approved without an election.

Definitions

afy: acre-feet per year. An acre-foot is 325,829 gallons or enough water to cover an acre of land one foot deep with water.

Basin Management Plan (BMP): a two-phase study that resulted in a long-range management plan to maintain water levels in the water basin

Buildout: when an area reaches maximum growth capacity according to its General Plan

cf: cubic feet

Fire service connection: a fire service meter connected to a residence used by the fire department in case of a fire

gpa: gallons per acre

gpd: gallons per day

mg: million gallons

Overdraft mode: when groundwater withdrawal from a basin exceeds the sustainable groundwater supply

Primary Groundwater Recharge: a zoning ordinance restricting development to a minimum of ten acres

Proposition 13: In March 2000, California voters approved Proposition 13 (2000 Water Bond), which authorized the State of California to sell \$1.97 billion in general obligation bonds to support safe drinking water, water quality, flood protection and water reliability projects throughout the state.

PVWMA: Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency

Recharge system: porous soil that allows water to filter back into groundwater aquifers

Seawater intrusion: when water from the ocean invades coastal wells

Static level: when the height of water in a well reaches the level of the surrounding water table

Scope

This investigation examines how several local water agencies are planning for future water needs.