

No drought problem in city — yet

By JENNIFER KOSS
STAFF WRITER

"Drought" is not the dirty word in South County that it is in Santa Cruz.

After two years of dry weather, Watsonville still has "water, water everywhere," relatively speaking, while Santa Cruz considering rationing water if its residents don't do a better job of conservation.

Watsonville can keep on pumping water for years before it would have to worry about its supply drying up, Assistant Public Works Director Dave Koch said this week at a committee meeting of the Watsonville Chamber of Commerce.

"It would take quite a number of drought years in a row," he said.

That's because Santa Cruz relies on surface water, which is stored in large reservoirs, while Watsonville is blessed with a groundwater supply tapped through a system of wells. In addition, gravity-operated storage tanks are maintained in the different zones within the Watsonville district to provide water in case of emergencies.

"Typically, we have a storage tank in each zone in order to provide for the times when there are power outages or when there's a fire," Koch said.

About 85 percent of Watsonville's water comes from groundwater, he said, and "groundwater in the Pajaro Valley represents a huge reservoir of water that's available."

The city now has 10 or 11 wells in service that can pump the water at rates varying from 400 to 2,000 gallons a minute, Koch said.

The other 15 percent of the city's water supply is surface water diverted from Corralitos Creek or Browns Creek above Corralitos. From there it's diverted to a filter plant for treatment which has operated in the area of Corralitos and Hames roads since the 1920s, Koch said. Even if that water supply dried up, it would not create an immediate problem for Watsonville.

"In a dry year, we can rely on groundwater 100 percent," he said.

However, "that's not to say that Watsonville has no problem water-wise," he said. "What we don't have is a short-term problem."

Studies have indicated a long-term problem with overdraft over the next 20 to 50 years, a gradual lowering of the water table as a result of more water being pumped out than is recharged back into the ground, he said. The amount of the estimated overdraft has varied with the studies, from 5,000 to 20,000 acre-feet a year.

Watsonville uses about 12,000 acre-feet of water annually — about 9,000 for residential use and 3,000 for industrial use within the city, Koch said.

Because of the evidence of overdraft, the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency is

studying ways to increase the valley's water supply on several fronts, Koch said. Probably the foremost alternative under consideration is the importation of 20,000 acre-feet of water annually from the San Felipe project.

If the decision was made to import and it was later discovered the water was not needed, the agency could technically sell the water to an outside agency, although that might be difficult in years when there's plenty of water around, Koch said.

However, he added, "in the long run, there is more demand for water than there is water."

Former Watsonville Mayor Ann Soldo interjected, "That's sort of like having a bank account, importing that San Felipe water."

Another analogy is that it's like an insurance policy, Koch said. So far, importation of the San Felipe water has been considered in terms of agriculture, since that way the cost of importing the water could be subsidized by the federal government.

For comparison, Koch said the water would cost in the neighborhood of \$300 to \$400 an acre-foot if used for municipal or industrial purposes. Agricultural use would cut the cost to about \$80 an acre-foot; that's still much more than the \$20 to \$30 an acre-foot farmers now pay for their water, but the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency would probably distribute the cost "with the philosophy that everybody in the valley is benefiting," he said.

Koch noted that there's been some argument that importing water would induce growth, since it would automatically make more water available for other uses and the growth of other uses.

Any use other than agriculture would require that the water be piped to a centrally located plant for treatment, however. It would then have to be dispersed from that central location, Koch said, and the city does not have a water main large enough to handle dispersing the water at the rate that would be required.