

# Farmers exempted from water conservation

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SANTA CRUZ — To Watsonville strawberry farmer Steve Garrett, county officials' discussions about Pajaro Valley water problems last month sounded like they were "getting to the point of telling the farmer what he can or can't grow."

Tuesday, Garrett and other farmers were put at ease when the Board of Supervisors removed agricultural use from measures intended to curb increased demand on water from the Pajaro Valley underground basin.

Instead, they unanimously adopted conservation measures focused on urban users, who are estimated to use 10 to 20 percent of the total.

"We've decided not to talk about water conservation as it relates to agriculture," said Supervisor Fred Keeley. This, he said, "was in deference to having public policy keep pace with public understanding."

But any new development, except single-family homes, in the unincorporated portion of the county will have to pay a fee to Watsonville to offset increased water use, supervisors agreed. The amount of the new fee, to be included in other permit fees, has not been determined.

The county measure will piggyback on a Watsonville proposal to reduce water usage through conservation, including retrofitting homes with low-flow water appliances, and fees on new development. The program is estimated to cost \$756,800 a year.

The goal of the Watsonville program is to reduce urban demand on the underground water basin by 15.6 percent. That is the city's estimated "share" of overdraft of the basin — taking more water out than putting it.

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— Steve Bontadelli, a La Selva Beach farmer

Supervisors acknowledged their actions won't begin to solve that problem or that of sea-water intrusion, when water is contaminated by salt. Any long-term solution will have to address agriculture, estimated to account for 70 to 80 percent of total water use. County planners said long-term solutions also will depend on getting a new water source to help replenish the underground basin.

Alternative solutions will be proposed as part of a basin management plan, expected to be completed next year, said Mike Armstrong, manager of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency, which is charged with overseeing and managing the basin.

Armstrong said the plan will include measures to curb increased agricultural use, including the possible metering of private agricultural wells.

Until then, he urged supervisors to work cooperatively and support his agency's efforts instead of antagonizing South County farmers with what he feels are premature declarations of a crisis.

Conservation plans must be in place, he explained, as a prerequisite to getting water from state or federal projects, such as importing water from the San Luis Reservoir in Merced County.

In January, county planners asked supervisors to determine whether de-

clining water levels and sea-water contamination of the 125-square mile Pajaro Valley groundwater basin was serious enough to warrant county intervention.

The measures proposed at that time warned that if water agencies didn't act to stop the overdraft, the county could pull rank and impose its own remedies.

Planners proposed that the county oppose any "intensification of water use" unless effects were offset.

That proposal was blasted as alarmist by Armstrong and others. Armstrong maintained the county should wait until the basin management plan is completed before taking "draconian" measures.

Each year, for the past 40 years, it's estimated that 11,000 more acre feet of water is taken from underground than

goes back into it. As the water in underground storage recedes, sea water from Monterey Bay has seeped in and well owners have pumped saltier water, according to Armstrong.

The situation has been exacerbated by the drought, new development and a shift to crops that require more water, such as strawberries, said Armstrong.

Farmers maintained that the county was sticking its bureaucratic nose into an area where it had no authority.

While strawberries use more water than apples — the so-called intensification — it is up to the farmer, not the county, to make that decision, said Steve Bontadelli, a La Selva Beach farmer who grows Brussels sprouts.

"It's totally unsalable to the agriculture community for the county to come in there and tell you, 'You can't do that.'"

Over the past few weeks, county planners softened their recommendations in what Supervisor Gary Patton called a rather "dramatic change."

Jeff Loux, assistant planning director, said the county's earlier proposal was never intended as a threat, but that it made more sense for the county to work with the city and water departments.