EARTH DAY

THE COUNTY AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

4-21-94

Editor's note: Three environmental issues have dominated coverage since Earth Day '93 — the ocean and wastewater pollution, contamination of fresh water supplies, and the move to limit logging of small tracts of forest land. For Earth Day '94, in a series of special reports, the Sentinel finds that some progress is taking place, but the future remains cloudy.

By JOHN BESSA
Sentinel staff writer

IN WATSONVILLE, sea water is slowly replacing drinkable water. In Scotts Valley, special filters extract dangerous chemicals from the drinking supply. Santa Cruz needs a way of treating its tap water to comply with expected changes in federal standards.

These problems aren't serious now, water officials said. Drinking water in the county is clean and safe.

But if it is to stay that way, providers and users of the resource must take action now.

The hazards to water supplies vary as much as the water supplies and the communities themselves.

In the Pajaro Valley, the problem is ocean water replacing fresh water pumped from the aquifer.

"This has been going on for 40 or 50 years," said Charles McNiesh, water resources specialist for the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency.

"The drinking-water quality is fine, but this is a long-term problem that is going to need attention," he said. "This is really the appropriate time to be taking action. It's clear that each year it gets worse."

Saltwater intrusion hasn't advanced to the point where agricultural fields have been abandoned because of a lack of irrigation. But that's only because the fields are part of larger parcels, and wells can been relocated inland, he said.

About 70 homes at Sunset Beach are now getting water from Watsonville because of salt water contamination of two wells.

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In Santa Cruz, animal waste

Please see WATER — A3

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The city of Santa Cruz posts the Neary Lagoon outflow, the site of a longstanding environmental battle.

More coverage inside

Lagoon outflow source of debate

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A cluster of signs warning of contaminated water along the Neary Lagoon outlet on Cowell Beach, are due to fouled groundwater being pumped for construction, not lagoon water, city officials said Wednesday.

The signs mark a trickle of water flowing into the sea from the site of a concrete wall being constructed as part of the new Beach Street promenade. The wall footings are below sea level, and require constant pumping to enable the concrete to be poured and to cure.

"To build the wall we need to dewater that area," said Larry Erwin, city director of public works. "It's typical of any construction when you are working below the water table."

The outfall has been the site of long, bruising battle between the city of Santa Cruz and environmentalists over the discharge of bacteria-contaminated water. The city had maintained there was no health risk from the discharge; ocean advocates disagreed. The city has agreed to permanently post the area, warning people to stay out of lagoon outflow water.

Once construction of the sea wall at the lagoon outlet is finished a permanent sign will be installed warning people not to touch any water flowing from the outlet due to contamination.

As recently as last month, children were playing in the lagoon

Please see OUTFLOW — A3

Water challenges

Continued from Page A1

from stables and septic leach fields threaten the quality of the water supply for 90,000 people.

Organic contamination in the city's major water sources, Loch Lomond reservoir and the San Lorenzo River, is treated with chlorine, said Bill Kocher, director of the city Water Department.

But chlorine treatments create a dangerous by-product — trihalomethanes, Kocher said.

The compound can cause cancer in laboratory animals in high enough doses, he said.

The current limit allowed is 100 parts per million of the chemical, Kocher said. But the federal government will require water to have fewer than 50 parts per million by 1996, when drinking water quality standards are changed.

The water district usually has numbers in the teens, Kocher said, but the amounts have been in the 50s before.

The city is exploring different ways of treating the water to meet future standards, he said.

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The San Lorenzo Valley Water District has avoided tainting of its surface water by drawing from creeks high in the mountains, above contamination sources, said Jim Mueller, district general manager.

The district serves a large portion of the San Lorenzo Valley. Half the water comes from wells; the rest from creeks and surface sources, he said.

A small septic tank leach fiel and an occasional timber harves create some contamination, Muel er.

"Otherwise, our watershed i pretty pristine," he said.

Like the San Lorenzo Valley Scotts Valley's water supply is als isolated from the type of contam nation found in Santa Cruz. Th district gets all its water from dee underground wells.

But the region's supply ha chemical contamination from leal ing storage tanks and spills tha have leached into the ground, sai General Manager Jon Sansing.

The district uses expensive fi tration to remove benzene fro two contaminated wells.

"They remove it all. There ae no residual (levels)," he said.

The district uses two filters o each well, and samples water regularly.

"It's very good-quality water. Some people don't like it because it has chlorine in it, b.t that's mandated by the health department," Sansing said.

Before filtering, the well water has had as many as 48 parts per billion of benzene in it, nearly 100 times the allowed limit.

Traces of other chemicals have turned up in the water, he said. None were greater than allowed by law.

Contamination can be prevented if people who use the land over a supply of groundwater are careful with chemicals, he said.

"Eventually, whatever you throw on the ground, throw in the septic tank or put in a creek is going to get in the drinking water," Sansing said. "It may not be for 20 years, but it will eventually find its way down to the aquifers."