

# Pajaro Valley, Midcounty spared worst of drought

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"Water: Every drop is precious."

Facing their fourth dry year and a mountain reservoir only half full, people in Live Oak and Santa Cruz will be reminded of that slogan almost daily.

But in Watsonville, Aptos, Soquel, Capitola and most of the areas in between, there are no plans for water rationing or more than token voluntary water conservation.

That's because Santa Cruz relies heavily on surface water — mainly that stored in its Loch Lomond reservoir. A few dry years and those supplies dwindle.

Although it operates a few

large water wells in the Pleasure Point area, most of its groundwater wells produce just a trickle when compared to the wells to the south.

The Santa Cruz City Council earlier this week set the stage for mandatory water conservation in the city's water service area beginning April 1 and, if there aren't any major spring storms, water rationing as early as May 1.

The water conservation measures stretch beyond the city's boundaries because Santa Cruz owns the water system that serves the unincorporated area between Santa Cruz and Capitola and a piece of Capitola.

Santa Cruz Water Conservation Coordinator Anne-Marie Mitroff said the Santa Cruz sys-

tem has a shortage of about 25 percent.

Watsonville, which in normal years diverts some water from creeks in Corralitos, gets most of its water from deep water wells.

The same is true for the county's third largest water purveyor — the Soquel Creek Water District. The Soquel Creek system relies exclusively on deep water wells into two underground rock formations to supply customers from Capitola to La Selva Beach.

Soquel Creek district general manager Bob Johnson said one formation needs only 20 percent of normal rainfall to be in balance.

In the Pajaro Valley, Water Management Agency general

manager Mike Armstrong said there have been mixed reports about the groundwater situation.

Away from coastal areas that are experiencing some seawater intrusion, Armstrong said, the situation varies.

"Some people say their (well) water levels have risen," Armstrong said. "I don't know why."

But Armstrong doesn't make light of the water problems in the Pajaro Valley.

"We are in much better shape here," he said. "However, we do have an overdraft problem, a seawater intrusion problem and pollution problems."

The pollution includes pesticides and nitrates from sources such as septic tanks and agricultural runoff.

Since the Oct. 17 earthquake, Watsonville has been pumping all of its water from its deep wells, city public works department spokesman Gayland Swain said earlier this week.

Water from creeks in Corralitos is normally treated at the filter plant in Corralitos before being released into the city's water distribution system, but the earthquake caused major damage at the filter plant. Repairs have not been made yet because water officials are waiting for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The Soquel Creek district has been selling water for years and some of it is trucked up into the Santa Cruz Mountains for thirsty homeowners there.

Water selling by the Soquel Creek district began in earnest in 1976 and 1977 when many mountain residents began to feel the effects of the 1970s drought.

Joe McCann, a senior public health specialist for the Santa Cruz County Environmental Health Department, has been monitoring the water well situation in the county.

"A lot of the wells up there (in the mountains)," he said recently, "have lost production or have just dried up."

A dry or poorly producing well prompts many residents to send out a call for the well driller.

"I don't think we've ever seen  
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so many wells drilled in Santa Cruz County, even before the earthquake," the 20-year county employee said.

McCann doesn't know if the problem is the three-year drought or the earthquake shaking things up.

"It's hard to say if the quake was the kiss of death," he said.

In the coastal areas of Santa Cruz County, a well driller is reasonably assured of bringing in a good well within a few hundred feet of the surface. Finding water in the mountain areas is always a risky business because there is no well-defined water strata — what's there

depends on annual rainfall.

In Santa Cruz, the April 1 water conservation measures involve limiting outdoor watering to certain days of the week for homes and businesses. Residential car washing will be restricted to weekends.

Mitroff said that even if rationing doesn't take place, the city will begin charging penalties for anyone who uses more than his allotment.

If the city's water situation doesn't improve, the next step will be water rationing May 1.

"When we designed this system, we looked at water-usage profiles," Mitroff said. "Fifty-five percent of our customers will not have to do anything different this year than they did last year."