

WATER SUPPLY

Loch Lomond deflating

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Recent heat ignites high water usage

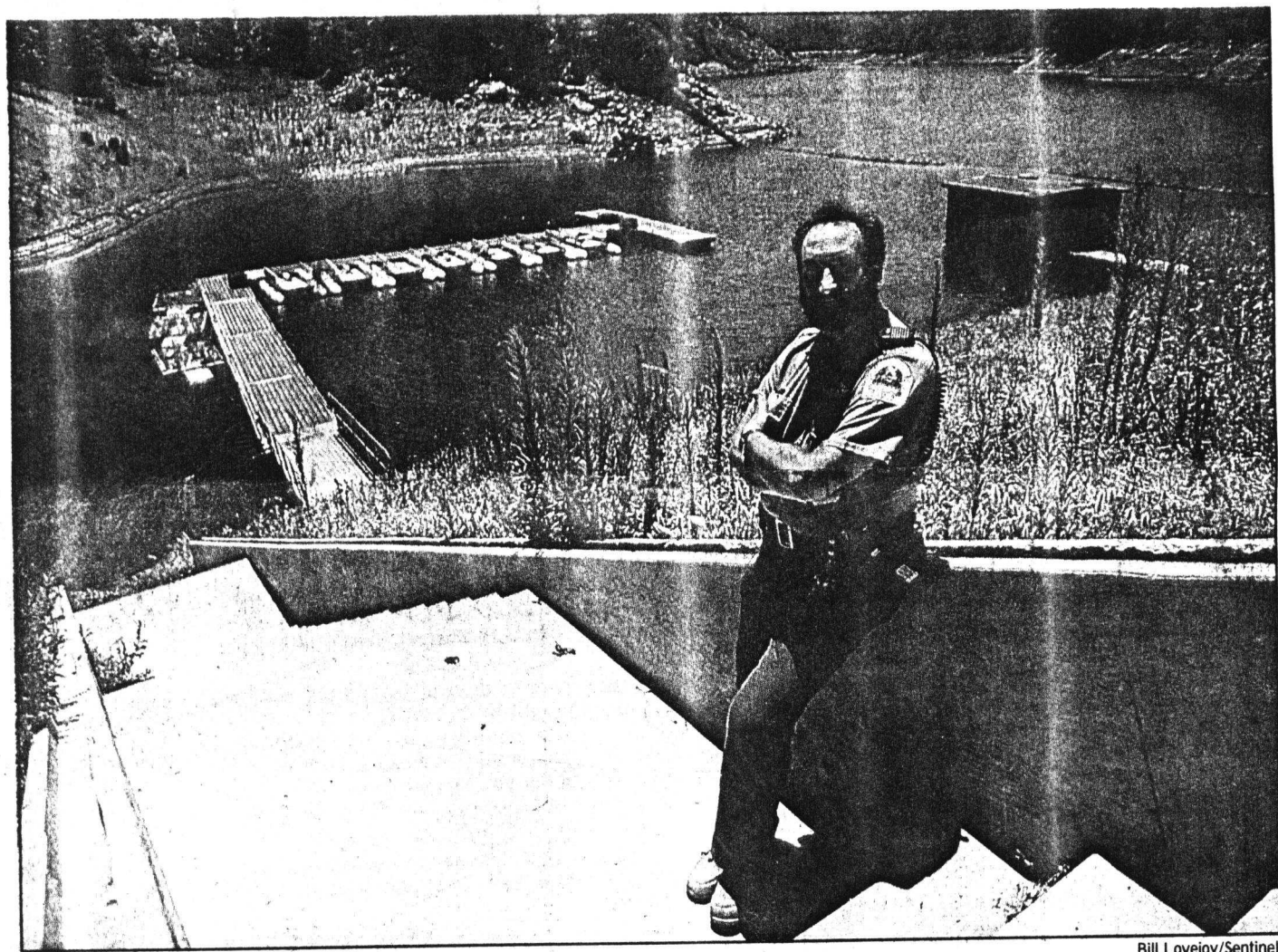
By DONALD MILLER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Water use by the 90,000 customers of the Santa Cruz Water Department climbed dramatically Wednesday, causing worried water officials to plead for restraint.

Warm temperatures Wednesday sent usage skyrocketing to 17.8 million gallons, Water Director Bill Kocher said Thursday. The department's goal is to limit use to 13.2 million gallons a day on average during the current water crisis.

"This is exactly what I feared," said Kocher. The upcoming Fourth of July holiday, plus forecasts of continuing warm weather have once again raised the real possibility of mandatory rationing, said Kocher, adding, "we won't let it get out of hand."

Meanwhile, the department's "cushion" — Loch Lomond reservoir in the mountains near Lompico — is deflating.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Santa Cruz Water Department's Walt Cacace stands where Loch Lomond's water level was last year.

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Reservoir emptying fast

By DONALD MILLER
Sentinel staff writer

LOMPICO — Walt Cacace and Loch Lomond are feeling a little empty these days.

Cacace, one of the Santa Cruz Water Department rangers at the reservoir, has presided over an empty park since September 15, when Loch Lomond shut for the season.

He's also been watching over a rapidly emptying reservoir, as the drought-afflicted water district begins to tap its reserve supply.

"It's going down pretty quick every day," says Cacace, who mentions this is the second drought in his 19 years at Loch Lomond. The first — in 1976-77 — was much worse, at least at this stage of the shortage. Then, the reservoir dropped to where all three intakes were out of the water. This year, only one is out of the water, with the second highest still under six feet of water.

But that doesn't mean everything's OK, said Cacace. Last year at this time, the reservoir's elevation stood at 560 feet above sea level. This year it's 545 — and dropping fast.

And so the place is shut down — for the third time in Cacace's tenure. The other times were during the 1976-77 drought and in 1982, after flooding wiped out Lompico Road, which is the only way to get to Loch Lomond.

And so the trout that state Fish and Game bring in to keep the fishing decent are going elsewhere — to Pinto Lake in Watsonville, the percolation ponds in Campbell and to Uvas Reservoir. But Cacace, surveying the glistening lake and the silent forest around it, said there are some benefits.

The trout that haven't been caught get a year to grow bigger; the deer and other wildlife get a year to romp around without hassle; and the visitor-trampled picnic grounds get a year off from the foot traffic.

Water/ Recent use skyrockets

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Water Department Water Conservation Coordinator Ann-Marie Mitroff said that customers may not be observing the voluntary "watering days" set up by the department, which delivers water as far south as 41st Avenue.

One complication in the department's efforts to get customers to voluntarily conserve has been an ongoing controversy over whether the city has adequately planned for low rainfall years by increasing its storage capacity or finding new sources of underground water.

But Kocher said that rainfall records show that the past two rainy seasons have been the second-worst drought period since such record-keeping started in 1919.

"Regardless of whatever planning has been done or that people wish would have been done ... it's almost moot. What we have is a situation where people can be harmed," said Kocher.

The department's problems have been further magnified because the Santa Cruz district is the only water agency in the county cur-

rently calling for voluntary rationing, much less raising the possibility of mandatory restrictions.

Kocher repeated past statements that the Santa Cruz Water Department relies on surface water rather than the underground sources, which keep the other agencies relatively water rich.

Kocher said the city simply does not have "the geology for groundwater." At a meeting last week between UC Santa Cruz Chancellor Robert Stevens and Mayor John Laird, the water issue reared its head when a UCSC geologist said the city does indeed have sources of groundwater it might tap. The city, however, says those sources are either financially or chemically unfeasible and that it recently spent \$290,000 on a study that proves this.

Kocher said that historical records indicate it is "not inconceivable" that a longer cycle of drought is just beginning. These same records indicate that several of the worst periods of drought have occurred in the past 12 years in the 70 years rainfall records have been kept. "How do you plan

for that?" he asked.

That aside, July Fourth traditionally signals a period of higher water use in the district, which, if the pattern holds, means it will be harder for the department to meet demand with water from river sources only. But if too much water has to then be taken from Loch Lomond reservoir, then the Water Department will be forced to start mandatory rationing, said Kocher.

The department had warned customers two weeks ago that if use did not drop, rationing would begin. That message seemed to get through, because despite high weekend temperatures, usage did drop and the department delayed mandatory restrictions. If and when a full-blown rationing plan is decided on, it will take about two weeks to institute, Kocher said.

Meanwhile the Water Department plans to post signs over the weekend warning tourists that water is scarce in Santa Cruz. Cards offering water conservation tips will be placed in local hotel rooms, and Mitroff will give a presentation at Harvey West Park at the city's annual Fourth of July picnic.

