

USGS Chief:

Seawater Intrusion Mid-County's Main Woe

Local officials dealing with the mid-county water problem should quit concentrating on the "safe yield" of groundwater and focus on the known problem of seawater intrusion into coastal wells, county supervisors were told Tuesday by a federal official.

USGS District Chief Richard Bloyd told the board, "It seems that rather than clouding the issue with safe yield (local officials) should deal with the fact that the water levels in the Aptos area are below sea level and there is some movement of the sea wedge."

The "wedge" is the meeting place of fresh water and seawater and the interface is held in place by the relative pressure of the two bodies of water.

It has been reported by USGS that overdrafting of the underground water supply in mid-county has lessened pressure in the Purisima Formation and al-

lowed the wedge to move inland.

"You would do well," Bloyd said, "to determine why there is the presence of chlorides (salts) in the wells at the coast."

County supervisors and Soquel Creek County Water District directors have been wrestling with the safe yield (safe harvest of underground water) since the 1980 USGS report on mid-county water was thrown into some dispute by one of the team's own hydrologists on Feb. 24.

It was on the basis of the report that the water district banned new connections and the county board banned new well drilling within the water district.

On Feb. 24, during county board hearings to expand the ban to cover the entire Purisima Formation (more than three times the size of the district) that USGS hydrologist Jay Akers testified the 1980 report was "not that definitive" and that

the safe yield could be significantly higher than the 4,400 acre feet indicated in the report.

Since then USGS officials and scientists have testified that the methodology of the 1980 report was good, that there is seawater intrusion into coastal wells and Bloyd said Tuesday the 4,400 acre feet "is in the ballpark."

According to the metering of most mid-county wells, it is projected that 5,400 acre feet are being taken annually.

During and after Akers testimony, local officials scathed USGS, noting that its high reputation had been tarnished.

Bloyd said he had noticed the press accounts of the attacks on his department's reputation and "I don't agree with them."

He told the board that there is no evidence that taking more water in the higher elevations of the Purisima (above

the sea level line of the underground water pool) will immediately increase the potential of seawater intrusion.

Bloyd offered, and the board took him up on the offer, to have his department develop a contour map of the underground water.

At the higher elevations, it is possible that more flow-through water can be tapped without lessening the force that keeps the sea wedge in place.

Supervisors Dan Forbus and Wayne Moore urged that no further public hearings or board actions take place until the contour map is done, expected around early June, but the board majority opposed that suggestion.

Supervisors Gary Patton, Joe Cuchiara and Robley Levy said they wanted to continue the public hearing on April 7 to determine if the ban should be expanded and the USGS officials said they would be on hand to answer any further questions.

It is expected that experts from the private sector, including development interests, will be on hand to present their arguments in opposition to the ban.