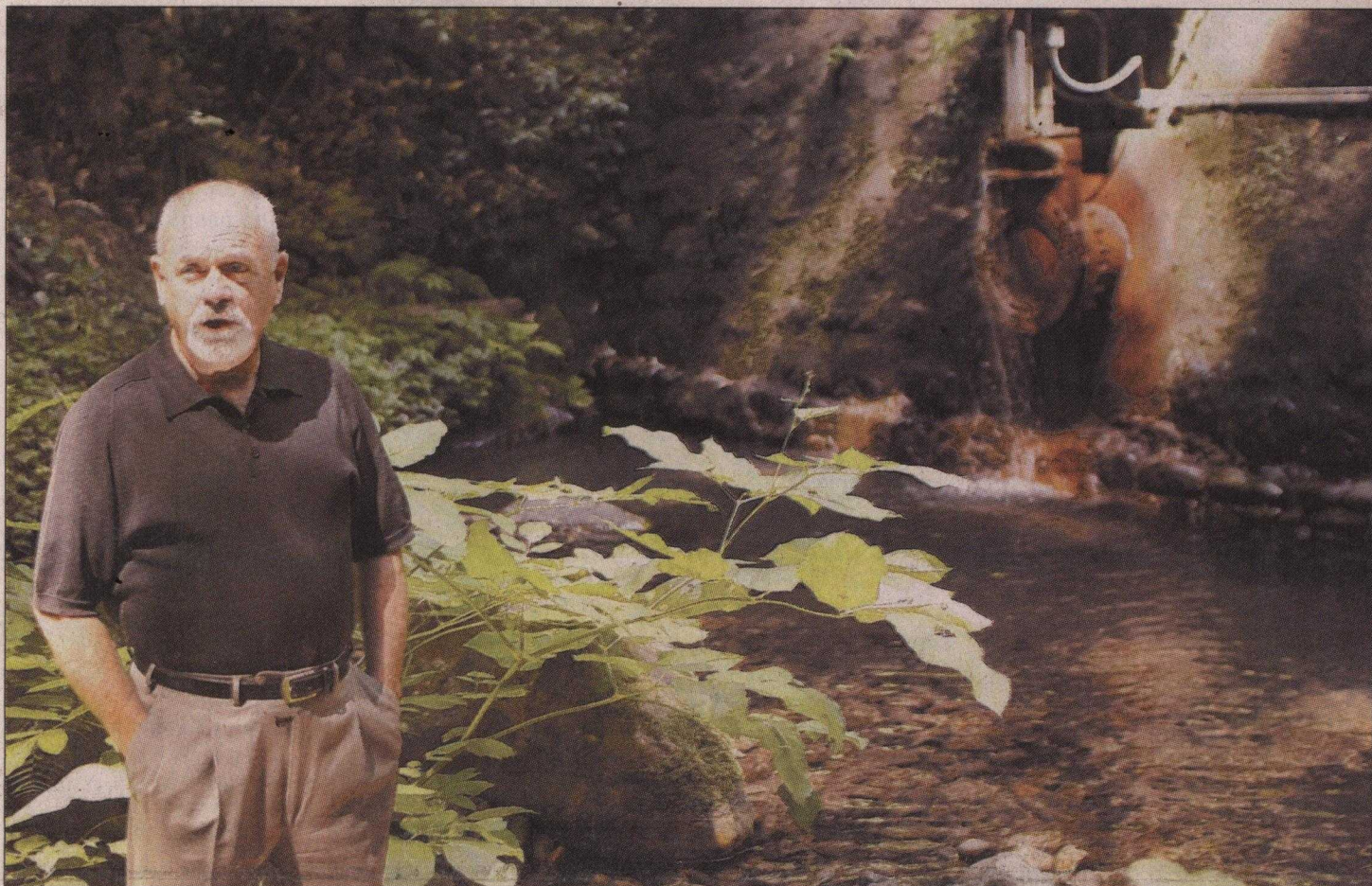


Water posed pressing political, environmental problems

DESALINATION PLANS SUSPENDED AMID STATE'S DRIEST YEAR ON RECORD



KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL FILE

Bill Kocher, who ran the Santa Cruz water department for 27 years, retired in September. An effort is underway to name a replacement.

Water Supply

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — Simply put, 2013 was a watershed year for water agencies in Santa Cruz County.

Often in short supply in California, water became an even greater environmental and political focal point in 2013 — the driest on record for some parts of the state — after the city of Santa Cruz drew down its reservoir to the lowest level in nearly two decades and pressed the pause button on a controversial seawater desalination facility.

Mounting criticism from the public and a host of state and federal regulators demonstrated the uphill battle city leaders faced in finalizing an environmental analysis of the project and winning approval from voters in 2014. In late November, the City Council voted to form a 14-member advisory panel to closely examine alternatives and make recommendations for supplementing and managing a water supply impacted by severe drought and mandated

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SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Santa Cruz resident Tom Manheim speaks about the draft environmental impact report for a proposed desalination plant during a public comment session in June.

'We listened and we heard that we are certainly not in agreement, and we recognize the need to re-engage in a community involved process to evaluate our water problem.'

HILARY BRYANT, former Santa Cruz mayor said in August

WATER

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fish habitat restoration.

The city's move to "reset" the debate over water after nearly a decade of planning for desalination sent Santa Cruz's desal partner, the Soquel Creek Water District, into an immediate inventory of its options for addressing saltwater intrusion in its over-pumped groundwater basin. The city also faced a judicial roadblock in extending additional water to UC Santa Cruz to support campus growth plans.

All this took place as the city and district underwent changes in leadership.

Bill Kocher, who ran the Santa Cruz department for 27 years, retired in September. An effort is underway to name a replacement.

The Soquel Creek district hired Kim Adamson, who managed a water and sewer agency in Washington state, to replace 16-year director Laura Brown, who retired in 2012 for medical reasons.

Scotts Valley Water District also hired a new director from within Santa Cruz's ranks — water finance chief Piret Harmon — while the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency lost a board member who led the district through a budget morass. Dennis Osmer resigned from the South County board amid a disagreement about how to restore the agency's overdrafted basin.

For all these reasons, the Sentinel staff chose water as a top newsmaker for

2013, and the topic looks to be front and center throughout 2014.

DESAL DEBATE

The Santa Cruz City Council in 2005 voted to pursue desal as the city's preferred water supply project while continuing conservation and initiating restrictions during dry periods.

Concerns about the environmental and economic toll of desalting ocean water increased after the city released an environmental analysis in May. During a rare three-month public review period, the city received more than 400 comments and questions, including criticism of proposed pump station locations near residential areas and a school that galvanized opposition.

The only alternative to desalination identified in the report as having the potential to reliably supply enough water to solve problems faced by the city and the Soquel Creek district was the direct reuse of recycled wastewater. The city proposed piloting a reuse project within the desal facility with the possibility of converting the plant once the state approves direct reuse, with Kocher saying, "We wouldn't be proposing a desal plant" if direct reuse were legal.

Still, in August, then-mayor Hilary Bryant joined City Manager Martín Bernal in recommending the council suspend the pursuit of desal and re-examine other alternatives rejected in the environmental report.

"We listened and we heard that we are certainly not in agreement, and we recognize the need to re-engage in a community involved process to evaluate our water problem," Bryant said in August. "If nothing else, it's my job and the council's job to listen to the community."

Three council members will nominate members to the 14-seat Water Supply Advisory Committee and appointments will be made in February.

MANAGING SUPPLY

The county's water resources division is expected in January to issue a report on the potential for sharing water among the area's multiple agencies.

The city also is expected next month to release details of its new water conservation master plan. Already a leader in conservation, Santa Cruz has been laying the groundwork to save more aggressively in coming years, noting the greatest savings can be found in higher-efficiency clothes washers.

Meanwhile, dry weather — seasonal rainfall is just 15 percent of normal in Santa Cruz — has caused the city to drain Loch Lomond Reservoir to about 66 percent, the lowest level since the mid 1990s.

The city has extended restrictions on daytime landscape irrigation and other measures set to expire in October, a month that also saw the city bring online a new 6-million-gallon tank at the Bay Street Reservoir after 18 months of construction. A second replacement tank is expected to be com-

pleted in 2014.

In addition to low rainfall, the city also saw a cutback in supply as it halted its diversion of Laguna Creek as part of ongoing negotiations with fisheries regulators to restore habitat in the North Coast streams and San Lorenzo River watershed for threatened and endangered species.

A group called Habitat and Watershed Caretakers prevailed in its legal fight against the city and university to block an expansion of water and sewer service on hundreds of undeveloped acres identified for growth. In a 2008 agreement that settled lawsuits between the university, city, county and preservation groups, UCSC agreed to house two-thirds of new students through 2020 on campus in an effort to reduce traffic, water, property rental and other impacts in town.

The state Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal of a lower court's findings of fault with an environmental analysis of the project, but the city and university have not announced their next step.

In the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency, officials released a draft environmental impact report saying a plan to boost groundwater supply would cost 30 acres of farmland. The proposal calls for deeper conservation, as well as storage and recharge projects for an agency whose finances got a boost in October after a court struck down challenges to its fees.

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