

Midcounty area facing prospect of water rationing

By BILL AKERS

Before this year is out, it is "very, very likely" there will be water rationing and a moratorium on new water connections in an area stretching from 41st Avenue on the west to La Selva Beach, and from the base of the mountains to the bay shore.

The moratorium and order for compulsory water conservation could conceivably come as soon as next month, after directors of the Soquel Creek County Water District hear a final report from their consultant on how the district can develop new water sources and how much it will cost to do so.

The facts are, the options for developing a new source of water to meet the current overdraft of the underground supply are very limited and very expensive and several years down the line — hence the serious talk now about rationing and a moratorium. The likelihood of these being instituted very soon was emphasized by water district General Manager Robert Johnson, following Monday night's meeting of the board of directors.

"This (moratorium and rationing) is a step the board can take," Johnson said, giving clear indication that it would probably do so. Only the timing of the action is uncertain. A better indication of when it might be will come after the board's Aug. 18 meeting, at which time a representative of Montgomery Engineering will present directors with the facts and figures on the scheme to build a diversion dam on Soquel Creek to capture the winter surplus runoff. The facts are grim and the figures high — at least \$5 million in today's prices to build the dam and five years to design and build it. That, according to Johnson, would require going to the people with another bond election and hitting water users with a doubling of water rates.

At their Monday night meeting, directors said nothing about moratorium or rationing. But director Dan Kriege did say that "our options are getting very small."

And director Lawrence Bargetto complained that "a lot of responsible people don't believe us when we say there's a water shortage. They believe it will be corrected in a short time. We're not getting the message across. We should make a strong statement."

The strong statement came from Johnson after the meeting when he underlined the "likelihood" of the moratorium and water rationing. And it was Johnson who told Santa Cruz County Planning Commissioners last week, at a public hearing on the 490-unit O'Neill Ranch development project, that there may be "water rationing or no new connections until a new source (of water) is found."

The water district was deprived of another option last week when the Santa Cruz City Council rejected its own water commission's recommendation and refused to sell the Soquel Creek district 1,000 acre feet a year of surplus winter

water for \$200,000. The council did so for a variety of reasons, including a fear that the commitment might become permanent and that the sale would stimulate growth.

The action perplexed the Soquel Creek directors, who felt the council's fears about growth inducement were laid to rest in the four-page, single-spaced memorandum presented to the City Council by the city's water commission. The memorandum cited the growth constraints imposed by Measure J.

"The answer was in the report," groused one Soquel Creek director Monday night. "They (just) didn't want the answer they got."

Santa Cruz Councilman Bert Muhly had also argued for a regional approach to the water problem, calling for a summit conference of a sorts of all governmental bodies.

"Organizations are meeting and are organizing joint ventures," Kriege told his board of colleagues Monday night, adding that with the city council's refusal to sell the surplus water, the only option left to the water district is the construction of the costly diversion dam with its attendant bond issue and double water rates to sell to the public.

Now, left to its own devices by the Santa Cruz City Council, the water district has decided to go its own way on another substantive issue which it was trying to solve in cooperation with the Santa Cruz city government. This is the matter of groundwater basin management — a bureaucratic term for controlling who takes how much water out of the underground.

With the latest rejection from Santa Cruz, Johnson said the only course open to the district is to try to take control of the groundwater basin. The district will propose enabling legislation — to be introduced in the legislature this fall — that will allow the formation of a groundwater basin management district.

The Soquel Creek County Water District is not the only user of the underground water basin which is being overdrafted to the tune of about 1,500 acre feet of water per year. The district pumps about 50 percent of the water used, with other agencies and individuals pumping the rest.

District officials feel that if they are to correct the overdraft, they must have total control over how much water is pumped out. A groundwater management district would give them that control.

And because the state government is trying to impose groundwater management on a state-wide basis, Soquel Creek directors feel confident the state will look kindly upon this effort to establish such a district. The state has already told all other water agencies and governments in the state, "Get a groundwater basin management plan, or we'll come in and do it for you." The state has moved into a couple of areas. The Soquel Creek

district would like to get the job done before the state moves in here.

"Originally," said Soquel Creek board chairman Ken Izant, "we thought this would be a joint venture with Santa Cruz. Now that Santa Cruz has dropped out, we'll go our own way."

Faced with the 1,500-acre-feet-a-year overdraft, a growth pattern greater than originally planned on (400 units a year instead of 300), and this latest rebuff by Santa Cruz, the Soquel Creek has run out of options.

"We'll need a new source of water by 1985," Johnson said Monday night. It will take that long to develop a new source, and, until then, the only option left to the board is a moratorium and water rationing. The board will not hesitate to impose either or both, and the likelihood of their doing so in the near future is more of a certainty than likelihood, Johnson indicated Monday night.

WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
July 22, 1980