

Dry times

Lack of rain causes concern, but it's not yet a drought

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Continued dry weather may put a squeeze on Santa Cruz water supplies this summer.

The city depends on surface water for about 80 percent of its water supply and, as a result, its supply is sensitive to the weather. So far this year, rainfall has been one-third of normal, said Eugene Watson, acting director of the Santa Cruz Water Department.

Watson is hoping for a few good storms to get the city through the summer.

With normal rainfall the rest of the winter, "we'll be squeaky-tight," Watson said. "We many have some trouble during the hot spells."

Several other sources of water will help the city through the year. The city's reservoir, Loch Lomond, is two-thirds

full. The city has also started pulling water from a new well and has finished an expansion that doubled the capacity of its water-treatment plant, Watson said.

If the next few months are dry ones, Watson said he will start thinking about ways the city can save water.

Other water systems in the county are largely or completely reliant on groundwater and, unlike Santa Cruz, have not been directly affected by the dry winter.

"A little shortage of surface water won't have a dramatic effect," said John Nichols, water engineer for the city of Watsonville. Watsonville gets 85 percent of its water from wells, and Nichols said the supply is "sound."

Similar reports have come from the managers of the Soquel Creek Water District and the Scotts Valley Water

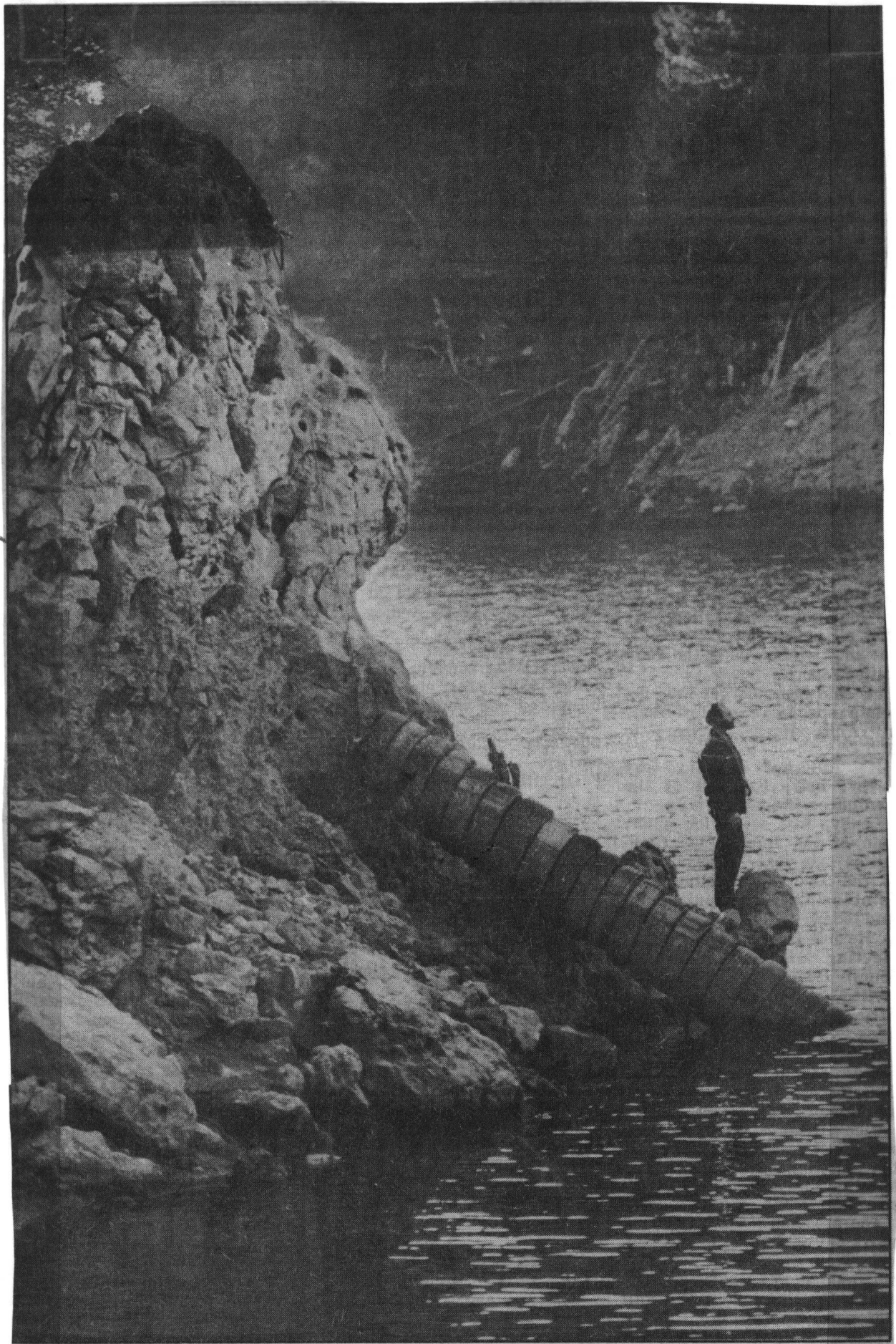
Department. Both systems get all their water from wells.

But if the dry winter turned into a two- or three-year drought, groundwater supplies would begin diminishing, said David Koester, acting general manger of the Scotts Valley Water Department.

Growers and others versed in the county's agricultural concerns say most crops are doing OK despite the lack of rain. More sprinklers than usual are running at this time of year, however, and the resulting water bill may burden some growers.

Some growers of row crops are taking advantage of the dry winter by putting in early plantings, but the advantages of doing so are complicated by the unusually cold weather, according to Rick Bergman, assistant agricultural commissioner for Santa Cruz County.

Because they can be irrigated in the meantime, most crops won't suffer as long as rains do eventually come later this season. But that doesn't apply to grasslands that cattle depend on. Bergman said rangelands depend on a continuous rain to replenish their growth, and that people in the business are having to watch their grazing lands carefully, or else convert from natural to purchased feed, such as oats, for their livestock.



Chip Scheuer

Normally a small island when city's Loch Lomond Reservoir is full, dark knob

towering over Chief Ranger Walt Cacace clearly shows high-water mark.