Residents of paradise by sea lack drinkable water

■ WATER

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McNeely said. "But there aren't any suds, so you never really feel clean.

"And it's probably killing our water heater."

She added that the water apparently is no good for household plants.

"I'm a lousy gardener anyway," she said. "So I now can blame it on the water. But I do think it killed my African violets."

George McNeely, a member of the Sunset Beach Mutual Water Co. board of directors, thinks help for the neighborhood may be on the way from the city of Watsonville.

He noted the city is running a main out to Pajaro Dunes, where the Pajaro Valley meets Monterey Bay, so that seaside development can have high-quality drinking water.

With some planning and cooperation among his mutual water company, the city and the state parks department, he said, water could be piped to Sunset Beach from Pajaro Dunes — which is about 1½ miles to the south, next to the state park.

The high chloride count at Sunset Beach is not atypical for wells at the western end of the Pajaro Valley, according to county water experts.

Chloride concentrations "have gone up quite a bit" in the region since early in the year, said Bruce Laclergue, Santa Cruz County hydrologist.

> "We wash with it and do laundry, too. But there aren't any suds, so you never really feel clean. And it's probably killing our water heater."
>
> — *Resident Mickey McNeely*

He said the standards limit chloride for drinking water to 250 parts per million and chloride for agricultural irrigation water to 500 ppm. Sea water contains about 19,000 ppm, Laclergue said.

A test well drilled at Sunset Beach had a recent count of 7,000 ppm, he said.

On the other hand, the intrusion of sea water into aquifers beneath the fertile fields along the Pajaro River has not increased much since the beginning of the year — although it remains a serious problem and probably will get worse before it gets better, if it does get better.

If the problem is going to get better, Laclergue and other experts agree, a series of steps, some of them expensive and controversial, will have to be taken.

Reclamation of wastewater from the Watsonville sewage treatment plant would be a must, said Brad Bennett, an organic farmer who is chairman of the board of directors of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency. That, he said, could recharge the aquifer beneath the Pajaro Valley with about 10,000 acre- feet a year.

An acre-foot is 325,800 gallons, enough for a family of five for a year before drought-induced conservation efforts.

Presently, Laclergue said, farmers and other users are pulling about 70,000 acre-feet a year from the Pajaro Valley aquifer. About 30,000 acre-feet naturally flows back into the underground supply annually.

For decades, farmers have been depending on the San Felipe Project to bring water from the Central Valley, via San Luis Reservoir, to their fields. The Pajaro Valley has an allotment of 19,000 acre-feet from the federal project, although no contract for delivery of the water has ever been signed.

Therein lies a new problem:

Legislation pending before Congress, designed to protect fish and wildlife habitat in the Central Valley and Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, would prohibit any new San Felipe agricultural water deliveries until those environmental problems are solved. That would be a severe blow to Pajaro Valley farmers, who say they need San Felipe water to keep their aquifers from filling with saltwater.

No contract can be signed anyway, Bennett said Tuesday, until a so-called basin management plan for the Pajaro Valley is approved. No such plan has been finalized, he said, and some farmers worry that such a plan will restrict their water use or subject them to unwanted regulations.

Without a management plan, Bennett said, there's no chance of getting San Felipe water. With such a plan, alternative water sources and conservation methods will be developed, including — everyone hopes — a supply from the San Felipe Project.

"Hopefully," Bennett said, "this planning will pay off.

"We're doing this not so much for ourselves, because this is going to take a lot of time. We're planning for future generations."