

# Emergency declared; moratorium on the way

By BILL AKERS

The other shoe has dropped: There is a water emergency in the Soquel Creek County Water District and a moratorium on new connections will be imposed.

The emergency was declared Monday night by the water district directors at a meeting at which they ruminated over the results of a year-and-a-half of data gathering and two public hearings. After officially declaring that an emergency exists, they then proceeded to instruct District Manager Robert Johnson and District Counsel Robert Bosso to draft an ordinance which will spell out the terms of the moratorium. This ordinance will be considered at the board's Dec. 1 meeting.

The moratorium will include all of the Soquel Creek County Water District except the La Selva Beach area. It was explained that that water system draws from a separate aquifer, is at a lower elevation, that the water system is not connected with the larger district system, and that an overdraft does not exist there.

The emergency was declared on the basis of conclusions in a report by the U.S. Geological Survey which says that since the early 1970s the underground water supply is being over-used to the extent of 1,000 acre feet a year. (That figure brought up to date

puts the actual overdraft at closer to 1,600 acre feet a year, Johnson said recently.) The result of this overdraft, the report said, is salt water intrusion into the underground water supply.

Conceding that they were working "on the basis of only one document," the directors called it a "scientific report" and said the U.S.G.S. "had no axe to grind" in making the findings. The only prudent action for them to take, the directors agreed, was to impose a moratorium and other restrictions on water use until supplemental sources of water can be found.

But the moratorium will not be an immediate cut-off of all new water service applications.

The moratorium, board chairman Ken Izant said, "will hit the small homeowner — the developers — those who have paid their storage and transmission (S & T) fees — it will work a financial hardship. We'll try to work around that as much as possible."

Toward that end, directors said they would not adopt an immediate cut-off, but will phase it through next year. The instructions they gave Johnson and Bosso to include in the ordinance indicate that as many as 650 new water connections will be allowed before the moratorium is an actuality. These would include:

—Single family home and

small project builders who were in the 1979 Measure J building permit lottery and are first in line for permits in 1981. This numbers about 228 units.

—Builders of larger projects — over 20 units — who will also get their permits in 1981. There are roughly 200 of these.

—Another 200 or so — 149 known and 50 added for safety cushion — vacant lot owners who have paid S&T fees and need only to pay the "drop-in" charge for their water meters.

—An estimated 46 units in the city of Capitola — which is not under measure J — allowed for those who have started through the city's permit process as of Nov. 10. The figure was chosen as an average of new water services in Capitola for each of the last three years.

Not included in the list of people who will get water connections was Seascope, which as been guaranteed 175 building permits a year by the county under terms of settlement of a suit, 93 of which Seascope intended to build during the coming year. This could complicate the moratorium issue in the future.

"The County can guarantee them (Seascope) permits, but we don't have to guarantee them anything," Izant said.

"This can better be resolved when and if the permits are issued," Bosso advised the board members, rather than in the

moratorium (ordinance).

The directors also hope to cut water usage in the district by 20 percent through a conservation program that combines voluntary and compulsory cutbacks. At present, there are no plans for rationing that would limit home owners to a set amount of water.

Board member Lawrence Bargetto said that the 650 or so new water connections that will be allowed will use about 200 acre feet of water a year. This could be offset by a 20 percent cutback in water use by present customers, Bargetto said, keeping the overdraft at current levels until a new water source can be found.

The most likely new water source will be a diversion dam on Soquel Creek which, along with a water treatment plant, will cost upwards to \$8 million to build. It will not be ready for three to five years.

If a 20 percent cutback in water use is achieved, it raises another problem. The district must find the money for the diversion dam and maintain a certain income level to pay off its bonded indebtedness. The possibility is that both water rates and S&T charges will be raised substantially in the future to achieve these ends.

Comments by the directors of the emergency and moratorium included:

—Dan Kriege: Citing the USGS report as a danger signal, he said, "Our first the future to achieve these ends.

responsibility is to the people who are now connected and to the well owners ... all we can do is impose a moratorium that will restrict new connections. We must reduce our own use. We can start with a volunteer program that will be closely audited to see what happens. We can't afford to gamble ... to be wrong."

—Mervin Garibotto: "An emergency does exist and we have to take action."

—Bargetto: "We have only one document, and we will be criticized ... but when in a state of doubt, the prudent action is to be careful and conservative. If we err in laxity, the community will criticize us for years to come. The document is a scientific report ... there is nothing better. Prudence dictates caution."

—Izant: "We would be amiss if we did not recognize that we are in a state of overdraft. We might be wrong — we won't know until we monitor the wells for years to come. The water belongs to the people who own the land over it ... it behooves us to go ahead and find additional water."

It was director Jack Beebe who made the motion to declare that there is an overdraft and that an emergency exists. It was quickly approved by unanimous vote.

The directors will meet again next Monday, but the moratorium ordinance is not expected to come before them until the Dec. 1 meeting.