

Geologists backing away from Soquel Creek report

By BILL AKERS

While saying they are not yet prepared to do so, officials of the U.S. Geological Survey are rapidly backing away from a departmental report that became the basis for moratoriums on water connections and well-drilling in the midcounty.

Citing some "shortcomings" in the U.S.G.S. report that says there is a 1000-acre-foot-a-year overdraft in the Purisma formation within the Soquel Creek County Water District, Charles (Bill) Boning seemed to understate the case today when he said, "I think that . . . probably some discussions between us and the water district on the conclusions in the report are in order." Boning said his staff members will meet with water district officials to thrash out what the report does and does not say.

Water district officials and supervisors were taken aback Tuesday when U.S.G.S. geologist J.P. Akers told supervisors that the report his office prepared for the water district "was subject to varying interpretations," and that the methodology used to compile the data in it "is not that definitive."

Supervisors were considering the extension of a well-drilling ban they have imposed within the water

district. With Akers' revelation, however, supervisors delayed for three weeks any action on the ban extension and may consider lifting it altogether.

The water connections ban is also now up in the air. Water district General Manager Robert Johnson said Wednesday that it now must be determined anew whether or not a water emergency does exist. Johnson said he will meet with U.S.G.S. on March 9, along with Santa Cruz city and county officials, "with the intent of getting a statement from them (U.S.G.S.) on the validity of the report, or lack of it, and what they intend to do about it." So far, the district's reliance on the report has cost it nearly \$200,000, according to Johnson.

Akers' statements to the supervisors Tuesday was the first solid evidence that the U.S.G.S. was of a mind of repudiate the report to a substantial degree. The report had been under heavy attack from builders, well-drillers and other factions since the water district imposed its qualified ban on new water connections earlier this year. They argued that the data in the report was faulty and the methods used to get it questionable and that the conclusion there is an overdraft is not

justified.

It now appears the U.S.G.S. is saying much the same thing, despite having stood by the report for more than a year while dealing with the water district.

Saying his department is "not backing off just yet," and that he will make "no real statements on the validity or lack of it of the report at this time," Boning did say there were "some qualifications that should have been stated in the report that were not stated." The report, Boning said, was "misunderstood and misinterpreted."

"It is clear the data was mostly on coastal pumping," he said. "That qualification and the impact that would have on the conclusions was not stressed strongly enough in the report."

The reference is to the argument by critics of the report that the salt water intrusion noted therein is caused by the fact that most of the district wells lie close to the coastline.

"If the distribution (of wells) was different — moved back from the coast — the intrusion would not occur," Boning declared. "That would imply the (safe) yield (from the underground) would be greater than what is stated in the report." But the yield data in the report, he said, "is

about as good as could be determined."

The U.S.G.S. report is less equivocal. It states flatly that "1,000 acre feet a year more than its potential yield" is being pumped from the Purisma formation and, as a result, salt water intrusion has occurred in shallow wells as far as a half-mile inland.

When reminded that the report, and the U.S.G.S.'s support of it in recent months, became the basis for the moratoriums, Boning said, "This department is not in any position to recommend any regulatory action" by an agency, but conceded that talks between his department and the water district were in order.

Boning echoed Akers' statements to the supervisors that hydrology is an inexact science, at best. "Different hydrologists will interpret the same data differently," he said.

Johnson says he will ask the U.S.G.S. "for some kind of qualification or verification on the status of the groundwater basin" at the March 9 meeting, and based on the reply he gets, will take a recommendation to his board of directors on March 16 about whether to lift or continue the connection ban.