

More talks on pipeline

Project delayed for study before water fee increase

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WATSONVILLE — After hearing farmers say a proposed \$134 million water pipeline is too expensive, Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency directors on Wednesday agreed to more study before raising fees to pay for the project.

"What you have is a Cadillac plan that I don't think we can afford," board Chairman Ed Kelly said after two hours of hearing farmers say the proposed fees for the pipeline

could drive them out of business.

At least one public study session will be held prior to the board's regular meeting June 12; no date has been set.

The pipeline, aimed at solving the Pajaro Valley's growing problems of groundwater overdraft and saltwater intrusion, would bring Central Valley water from a pipeline that already extends as far west as Gilroy.

To pay for the pipeline, the Water Management Agency would raise its current fee of \$35 an acre foot of water by about \$20 a year until it reaches \$165. The fee is for taking water out of the ground, not the water itself, because the Water Management Agency doesn't pro-

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vide any water now.

An acre foot is 325,900 gallons, enough to cover an acre with a foot of water.

"We're putting ourselves out of business" if the pipeline is built, said Ellen Hutchings, who owns farmland in North Monterey County. "There must be another way."

The board heard a number of suggestions from the audience of 50 farmers at City Hall. Those included building dams, having a tiered system of charges for using groundwater, and seeking state and federal help for building the pipeline.

"The state is going to have to step in," said apple packer Ray Travers. "We can't afford to pay the money."

Dave McCabe, the Water Management Agency's general manager, said after the meeting that state or federal assistance is not out of the question, but is unlikely. The district already has made inquiries, he said.

Lettuce farmer Dick Peixoto suggested the Water Management Agency charge for groundwater use with a tiered system, with a higher rate per acre-foot when water use reaches a certain level.

The suggestion drew praise from some, and opposition from those who use the most water, such as flower growers.

"We grow year-round," said Karen Sambrailo of Pajaro Valley Greenhouses. It would be "grossly unfair," she said, to charge higher fees to those who grow year-round.

Kelly, a strawberry grower, said he wouldn't mind a fee for excessive use, but not simply a higher rate for farmers who need to use a lot of water.

Farmers have "already sacrificed the future" by drawing more water from the ground than is going back in, said board member Brad Bennett.

The pipeline, Bennett said, "will only cost more in the future" and he expressed regret that "we didn't do it 20 years ago."

Bennett said it's "a big crystal ball whether anybody farming today will be farming five years from now. That's a question regardless of what we do."

Kelly said the Water Management Agency could reduce the specifications for the pipeline to a less-expensive model. Dropping the inland distribution system from the design would save \$22 million, he said.

Without the inland system, inland growers would continue to draw water from the ground, while coastal growers would use the pipeline water.

It's the coastal areas, where salt is getting into the groundwater, that have the biggest problems.

It would still be cost-effective to build the pipeline without the inland system, McCabe said.

Agency directors conducted a first reading of the ordinance to raise the \$35 per acre-foot rate by \$20, but they indicated they don't intend to approve the second and final reading before more discussion at public meetings.