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'Water-sharing' viewed as hedge against shortage

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Local officials are talking about sharing the county's water supply to ensure that no one goes thirsty when development reaches the level permitted under current General Plan policies.

Referred to as "buildout" and assigned no specific date, that level is expected to cause the greatest water shortage in the city of Santa Cruz, and a shortage of smaller proportions in the Felton/Scotts Valley area, according to a water master plan study of North Santa Cruz County.

The study recommends that a surplus of groundwater predicted in the Soquel Creek Water District be shared with Santa Cruz and other adjoining areas when surface-water supplies are short.

However, Soquel Creek's general manager, Bob Johnson, said the report's conclusions are inaccurate.

"It underestimates the amount of demand and overestimates the amount of supply" regarding Soquel Creek's water, he said.

Johnson said he considers it a "major flaw" that the report is based on existing water district boundaries. In reality, he explained, Soquel Creek Water District expects "a continued pattern of growth to the turn of the century."

The district is spending \$1 million on a well-monitoring system because officials are worried that growth could end up overtaxing its water supply, he said. The district is also spending "hundreds of thousands of dollars" on moving wells away from the coast to guard against saltwater intrusion, he added.

The water master plan study makes no mention of saltwater intrusion, and projects an annual surplus of 1,681 acre-feet (one acre-foot equals 325,851 gallons) of water for the Soquel Creek district at buildout — the largest surplus of any agency studied. Central County Water District is next in line with an annual surplus of 694 acre-feet.

The projection shows Santa Cruz, on the other hand, with annual water shortages of 3,751 acre-feet at buildout. A shortage of 168 acre-feet is predicted in the Felton/Mount Hermon area, and of 153 acre-feet in Scotts Valley.

The sharing of the Soquel Creek district's water supply would provide an adequate supply at a lower price than the alternatives, the report claims.

Those alternatives include

water conservation and leak-control programs, dams on Zayante and Glenwood creeks, development of additional groundwater supplies through pumping, and increasing the Santa Cruz city water supply according to the city's Capital Improvement Program, which calls for a storage reservoir and a pump station on the county's north coast.

"In general, the groundwater projects appear to be more cost-effective than the surface water projects," the report states.

It recommends an "inter-tie" system to connect water distribution systems, enabling agencies to share water. Such a system, besides being the most economical, the report states, would also produce the most water — 20 percent of that projected for all of the alternatives together.

Soquel Creek might be amenable to the idea of sharing its groundwater during the summer for a share of surplus Santa Cruz surface water in the winter, Johnson said. However, the district's main interest is in protecting its water supply; that's why it chipped in about \$35,000 for the \$250,000 study.

"What we're trying to do is protect it," he said of the district's water supply, "and maybe others will join in."

The very concerns that instigated the study — the 1976-77 drought, growth-control ordinances adopted by the city of Santa Cruz and the county, and a 1980 preliminary study that indicated a shortage of water by 1990 — are why all land-use and water-use agencies in the county have to cooperate in planning, Johnson said.

The Water Policy and Planning Task Force in charge of the water master plan includes representatives from nine water- and land-use agencies. The study area includes the entire county except Watsonville and a portion of northern San Lorenzo Valley.

Now that the study is completed, Johnson said, the task force would like to get Watsonville to join in the discussions about the county's water supply.

Watsonville did not participate in the county's study because it was already involved in a study of the Pajaro Valley Groundwater Basin water supplies, said Dave Koch, Watsonville's assistant director of Public Works. However, he added, Watsonville will probably join the discussions if asked.

Johnson said the task force is planning another meeting next month.