Farmers urged to irrigate efficiently

By JAMIE MARKS
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WATSONVILLE — Four years of drought, an ever-increasing demand and a shrinking supply of clean water are pushing the Pajaro Valley to the brink of dramatic change, the general manager of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency told a group of farmers Tuesday.

Within the next year, the water agency will decide whether to import water through a series of pipes or viaducts from the San Luis Reservoir near Los Banos, in what is commonly referred to as the San Felipe Project.

If water is imported, said Mike Armstrong, general manager of the water agency, it will be only one of several water-use decisions the agency will make.

Among the other alternatives being considered are reclaiming rinse water from food-processing plants, which use up to 1 million gallons a day, and building reservoirs, using water that collects each year in such places as College Lake.

Against that backdrop, farmers were encouraged to look at ways of making their irrigation most effective.

Steve Siri, president of the county Farm Bureau, said the water issue is becoming increasingly politicized, and at some point pressure will be put on farmers to cut back consumption.

In the Pajaro Valley, farmers use 86 percent of the water. As more farms convert to crops such as strawberries and cut flowers, agricultural water consumption will increase, Armstrong said.

One of the best ways farmers can determine if their irrigation techniques are working is through a free program being offered by the water agency and the Los Banos Resource Conservation District.

Kevin Peterson, of the conservation district, will visit about 15 Pajaro Valley farmers in the next few months with a mobile lab to gauge irrigation practices.

The agency received a $24,000 grant from the Bureau of Reclamation to finance the lab.

Peterson can measure well pressure, check uniformity of water distribution and irrigation efficiency for a variety of irrigation techniques.

The Department of Water Resources has tested irrigations systems in six Southern California farming counties and seen dramatic variations in efficiency. Some farmers get as low as 28-percent efficiency, while others see 100 percent.

New techniques are being perfected through research all the time, said Steve Tjosvold of UC Agricultural Extension Services. He outlined two water-saving practices that have helped flower growers reduce their water consumption.

One uses a computer that switches on water when soil conditions warrant it, and another measures evaporation in rose plants.

The bottom line, said Norm Welch, another UC advisor, is that the Pajaro Valley faces a serious water problem.

"The quality of life in the Pajaro Valley is tied to water and that water quality is going down," he said.

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Toby Goddard of the county Planning Department discusses mobile water lab with tester Kevin Peterson.