Hydrologist warns of saltwater intrusion

Freshwater pipeline study anticipated

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WATSONVILLE — Area farmers met yesterday with a Santa Cruz County hydrologist to discuss ground water management issues, including a proposed pipeline to serve coastal crops.

Bruce LeClergue, a hydrologist in the Santa Cruz County Planning Department, told members of the Community Alliance with Family Farmers that because of seawater intrusion, wells within as much as a mile of the coast are pumping undrinkable water.

The city of Watsonville last year completed a pipeline to the Pajaro Dunes area to increase the fresh water supply to the seaside homes.

That's why Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency officials are anticipating the results of a study into the construction of a 23-mile San Felipe Pipeline from the existing Santa Clara conduit from the Central Valley Project's San Luis Reservoir into the Pajaro River basin.

An outlet southeast of Gilroy, intended for future use by the Pajaro Valley, would provide the proposed $48 million tube's connection with the existing line.

After lateral lines and other equipment are added, the project's total construction cost may reach $100 million, LeClergue said.

"I think there's a lot of momentum toward getting this study done," he said. "The board has some concerns with the price tag."

Each year, the proposed line would carry as much as 19,900 acre-feet of water — about 6.5 million gallons — into the basin.

The study is expected to be complete in about six months; construction of the 54-inch-diameter line would take as much as three years' time.

The Pajaro Valley board, LeClergue said, hasn't set the pipeline as a priority.

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Because the water table has sunk to depths below sea level, Pacific Ocean waters are slowly moving into the underground aquifer, he said. Ground water pressure levels have progressively lowered to a point where, by 1990, only the areas closest to the mountains were above sea level.

LeClergue contrasted his 1990 data with state water resources data from 1951, which showed ground water across the area was completely above sea level, with fresh water draining into the ocean.

"It's a big wedge of sea water that is mobilizing again and is moving inward," he said.

Some early warning wells checked by the Soquel Creek water district are filled with pure sea water, he noted. As much as a mile inland from Sunset State Beach, experts report salt water intrusion.

Between 1988 and 1995, he said, the amount of chloride measured in the Pajaro Valley agency's early warning wells more than doubled — from 8,000 parts per million to 11,000 ppm — nearing the same amount as pure sea water, 19,000 ppm.

To prevent further ground water pumping, LeClergue said the district is also eyeing a proposed dam on College Lake.

If College Lake is backed up, stored water would be released to the coastal area for irrigation or ground water recharge by pipeline or by natural waterways.

Whatever the plan of action, farmers are worried about having to call ahead to water their fields. If the pipeline is laid, LeClergue said, scheduled water deliveries on a rotational basis would be mandated.