

DEALING WITH DROUGHT

City takes first step toward water rationing

✓ By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — City leaders will decide in two weeks whether to enact water rationing to deal with an ongoing drought, a move unseen in Santa Cruz since 1990.

The Santa Cruz City Council set a public hearing for Feb. 25 to decide whether to increase a shortage alert to require rationing for residential customers and sharply cutting landscape irrigation. The council could not take direct action on rationing Tuesday because of public noticing rules in the state water code.

The city's Water Commission voted Feb. 3 to recommend stepping up to the third of five shortage levels with the goal of cutting overall consumption up to 25 percent. The plan prioritizes water for health and safety, then business and

WATER SUPPLY COMMITTEE

The members are residents Doug Engfer, Dana Jacobson and Charlie Keutmann; Suzanne Holt, a water customer outside city limits, Rick Longinotti, Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives; former mayor Mike Rotkin, Sustainable Water Coalition; Sarah Mansergh, Santa Cruz Chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, Greg Pepping, Coastal Watershed Council; Erica Stanojevic, Sierra Club; Peter Beckmann, Think Local First Santa Cruz County; Mark Mesiti-Miller, Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce; Sid Slatter, Santa Cruz Business Council; water commissioners David Green Baskin and David Stearns.

Under a rationing program, the Water Department will set consumption budgets for each household and set penalty pricing by May 1 for customers who exceed it, except for non-landscape commercial users. The department will ramp up communication to customers about restrictions while also looking at immediate conservation measures, such as graywater use inside, that can be pursued.

is about using rates to keep water use down," Water Director Rosemary Menard said. She later added, "This is for people to have a clear message about what we need from them and a clear target about what they should be doing."

There have been just five inches of rain in Santa Cruz during the season, far below the average. Stream flow in the San Lorenzo River is lower than during the historic drought of 1977, though

is in better shape, 65 percent full compared to about half that amount in 1977.

The Water Department has set a goal of 62.5 gallons per day per person for a four-person single-family home. Residences and businesses would receive 5 percent and 10 percent less water delivery, respectively, while landscape irrigation will take a 65 percent cut.

Ana Rasmussen, who plans to start a community garden in Live Oak within the city's water service area, urged Santa Cruz not to penalize people who live in multifamily dwellings and need to grow food for themselves. Calling it a social justice issue, she said the gardens should be seen as "the backyard of low-income people."

Menard said community gardens will be treated differently than large landscape users. Earlier Tues-

a 14-member Water Supply Committee established before the drought to study choices for managing and creating more supply. The council established the committee after the city halted pursuit of a seawater desalination plant that has been a cornerstone of supply planning for a decade.

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