

Water chief's problem: no water

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SANTA CRUZ — This year more than ever, Bill Kocher would like to keep a low profile.

He believes that being a good water department director is like being a good umpire. "Not to be noticed is the ultimate compliment," he says.

The problem is, Kocher is like the home-plate umpire straining to see, as the tying runner starts his slide with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning.

All eyes are on him now that the city has imposed water rationing.

Kocher brought his family here from Chicago in 1985 to escape from the horribly hot summers and cold winters. "What did we get? Four years of drought and an earthquake," he says.

The four-year drought started in 1986, the year he took over as Water Department director.

Rationing was a foreign word to Kocher. "Chicago's water supply was Lake Michigan," he explains. "I didn't understand the concept."

By pumping every drop of rain that fell into the San Lorenzo River up to the Loch Lomond Reservoir, Kocher was able to forestall rationing for three years. But this year has been the driest of the lot and there has been no late-spring rain to stave off rationing.

The river normally supplies 60 percent of the city's water needs.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Bill Kocher stands heel-deep in Santa Cruz's main water supply — the San Lorenzo.

Another 20 percent comes from streams on the county's north coast. The remainder comes from wells and from dipping into Loch Lomond Reservoir.

"In any given year you shouldn't draw down the reservoir any more than you can put back the next winter," Kocher explains. The last four years,

that has not been possible.

All water agencies which rely on surface water are in dire straits this year, Kocher tried to explain to a third-grade class recently.

Kocher said it quickly became clear the kids were looking for someone to blame. "I could tell they were repeating things they

had heard at home," he says.

There really is nobody to blame, he says, except mother nature.

City officials, he said, have always based their water planning on the best information available at the time. Twenty years ago, he said, planners could not have

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foreseen the shift in weather.

One of the most frequently asked questions is why does Santa Cruz have to ration when Scotts Valley, Watsonville and Capitola do not?

The answer is that Santa Cruz relies on surface water and the others pump ground water from wells.

The next question, then, is if there is a large underground source under those areas, why isn't there one under Santa Cruz? Kocher wishes dearly that there was.

But, he says, experts have checked and there just isn't any large supply under the city or under the county's north coast.

"The department has spent \$350,000 over the last five years trying to find groundwater. I'm satisfied that the issue has finally been put to rest. We're just not going to find any. It's a geological fact.

"Anybody who thinks there is and I'm not doing anything to find it ought to follow me around one day. I don't enjoy this

drought," he adds.

The city now is ready to embark on a new long-range plan, taking the water department to the year 2005.

The City Council was scheduled to discuss the plan the week of the Oct. 17 earthquake. It has been on the back burner ever since.

If the mission is to plan for 100 percent water coverage by 2005, the city will need new "storage," Kocher says.

The 1963 water master plan called for a Zayante Dam, which was unpopular for political and environmental reasons. Had that dam been built, there would have been no water shortage this year.

But, Kocher says, had that storage been built, it would have been three times as big as necessary to meet current needs because the 1963 projections miscalculated population growth and future water use.

Not only did Santa Cruz grow less than expected, but average household water use has dropped 50 percent. The 1976-77 shortage

taught conservation lessons that residents continued to use when the shortage ended, Kocher says.

What the Water Commission is projecting now is a storage area of about 6,000 to 7,000 acre feet. That, Kocher says, would be expected to meet 100 percent of the needs by 2005.

The difficult figures to use in the upcoming projection, Kocher says, will be the number of drought years. "If you base it on the last 80 years, you'd plan for a drought every 10-11 years. If you based it on the last 30 years, you'd plan for a drought every three years."

Kocher believes the last 30-year period is highly unusual if viewed from a historical perspective. So to plan facilities based on that experience, he believes, would lead to over-building.

The decision on what to do to meet future needs, Kocher says, will be a policy decision that needs to be made by the City Council.

In the meantime, Kocher faces one more difficult question: How

much is this drought going to cost customers? People remember the Water Department tacked on a big surcharge after the last rationing plan in 1977.

"Now there was a popular plan," Kocher says with a laugh.

The city began a special fund after that drought to help meet increased costs should another occur. Rationing presents a unique problem, Kocher says: Department revenues fall as water use falls, while costs increase because staff must be added to run and enforce a rationing program.

That fund has staved off another big increase. Still, Kocher says customers are going to have to foot higher bills in the future to pay for the current drought.

"I'm not stupid enough to try to do that all at once," Kocher says.

Because even though there have been four years of drought and an earthquake, "I really like this town and want to keep on living here."