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JTM 10-4-90 1B

Well metering plan attacked

Water management agency hears hostile comments

By Bob Johnson
Special to the Mercury News

Angry rural Pajaro Valley homeowners say they vehemently oppose a proposal to put meters on their private wells.

Water officials from the three-county Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency are considering mandatory meters so they can determine how much water is pumped from an estimated 2,000 private wells scattered from the Elkhorn Slough area of Monterey County to Corralitos in Santa Cruz County and a small area in San Benito County.

The meters could also be a prelude to water rationing or fees.

"How soon after you put the meters on these wells are you going to start taxing the water, and where is that money going to go?" one resident asked Mike Armstrong, the agency's general manager, Tuesday night.

Armstrong fielded generally hostile questions while explaining the proposal to 350 residents in a Watsonville meeting.

"What gives anyone the legal right to tell me I have to put a meter on my well?" one man asked.

Water agency board members have abstained from taking a position on whether to require meters for all or some of the wells until they are ready to make a decision early next year.

The metering proposal is a sign that the agency is moving toward expanding its role.

Voters created the Pajaro Val-

ley Water Management Agency in 1984.

One of its responsibilities is to consider whether the Pajaro Valley should build a pipeline to import water from the San Felipe project. The agency has no water to sell, because private wells supply virtually all of the water used by agriculture and the 75,000 residents who live outside Watsonville.

In recent months, the board has become increasingly interested in other possible solutions to the decades-old overdraft problem. The agency is considering reservoirs at College Lake or Pescadero Creek, reclaiming sewage water from Watsonville or from Gilroy and Morgan Hill, conservation, and increasing the total capacity of the aquifer by closing 200 wells near the coast.

But the board is limited in choosing new water sources because all of the information it has about how much water is used in the Pajaro Valley comes from consultants' estimates. And those estimates have been troubling in their variety.

In 1986, Luhdorff & Scalmanini of Woodland reported that water use was in the range of 110,000 acre-feet a year. But last year, Montgomery & Associates of Walnut Creek said the figure is closer to 70,000 acre-feet.

Board member Steve Dautoff defended the agency. "The people on the board are just like you, except that we've been going to meetings for six years to try to understand the problem," he told those at the meeting.