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As rains go, so goes Santa Cruz

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

GET USED to a Santa Cruz of unflushed toilets, brown lawns and water restrictions far into the future — unless the winters bring heavy rains.

Already in dry years the demand for water outstrips the city's supply, and it will only get worse as the population grows.

"We've always been able to enhance the system to keep up with demand, but now we're at a crossroads," says Bill Kocher, head of the Santa Cruz Water Department.

If the city wants to avoid a future of water restrictions, the system has to expand, Kocher says. Options are limited, expensive and politically difficult.

The inherent problem in the city water system is that it depends almost entirely upon rainfall. While that's adequate in years of heavy rain, in dry years the system falls short.

To meet future demand, the Water Department has developed a list of options which are

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in the preliminary engineering phase.

Most will not provide enough water to make an appreciable difference.

"No one project is going to solve all the problems," Kocher says. "Some are more difficult than others, and the truth of the matter is it comes down to what the people want."

Among the options:

● **NORTH COAST RESERVOIR** — For 40 years the Water Department has considered a dam and reservoir on the North Coast of Santa Cruz County, and Kocher says it remains a desirable option.

One idea is to pump water from Scott or San Vicente creeks to a reservoir on another creek in an area that does not have a native fish population. Listed as possible reservoir sites are Baldwin, Majors, Yellow Bank, Molino and Liddell creeks.

The building of any such reservoir would be difficult, because of environmental concerns, Kocher says. Another option is a series of small storage pools on a number of North Coast streams, connected by pipeline to the city's treatment plant.

An earlier plan to build a reservoir in Zayante is considered dead, Kocher says.

● **DESALINATION** — With endless acres of ocean water lapping upon the shores of Santa Cruz, a desalination plant might seem a natural, but according to Kocher, the cost makes it unlikely.

To build a plant to supply a major share of the city's daily water needs would cost upwards of \$50 million. Even then, the cost of running such a plant is expensive. Desalinated water costs \$3,000 per acre-foot, compared to \$700 per acre-foot produced now.

The system is also wasteful, and depends on fossil fuel, Kocher says. Desalinated water is produced by forcing seawater through membranes at very high pressures.

Restriction planning

SANTA CRUZ — Once again the city is planning for water restrictions beginning in April and for more severe rationing in May if heavy rains do not come.

The Water Commission is meeting at 7 p.m. Monday to decide on restriction guidelines that will be forwarded to the City Council for adoption.

Unless a prolonged series of storms fill Loch Lomond Reservoir and local aquifers, restrictions are certain to go into effect April 1. If at the end of April conditions have not improved, a limited water rationing plan will be enacted May 1.

Kocher said the provisions are up for debate and discussion and urged anyone who wishes to comment to attend the meeting Monday.

For every gallon of drinking water produced, nine gallons are flushed back into the sea.

● **ENLARGING LOCH LOMOND RESERVOIR** — Another option is to increase the height of the Loch Lomond Reservoir dam.

Kocher says this plan is also difficult politically, with possible resistance from residents.

"The dam is well-built and solid," Kocher says. "But I question whether we would have the same level of confidence if we topped it and put more water behind it."

● **GROUNDWATER WELLS** — Underground water is limited, and the option will not produce enough water to provide for future needs, Kocher says.

Unlike other districts, the city has no sizable underground supplies. Only 10 percent of the city's water comes from underground pumping, and that isn't going to change, according to Kocher.

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