

Water board wants some answers from USGS

By BILL AKERS

If there's been an outbreak of burning ears among the people up at the U.S. Geological Survey headquarters in Menlo Park, it's because the directors of the Soquel Creek County Water District are talking about them, and in not too kindly terms.

Why, the water officials want to know, did the USGS geologists take nearly two years to put together a report that said the district had a serious overdraft problem, then go around telling everyone but the district the report couldn't be trusted?

Why did the USGS keep mum about the \$40,000 report during all this time, then seemingly refute it two months after the final report was issued?

Why is the man who wrote the report not around either to defend or refute it on his own?

When is the USGS going to stand up before the board (and the public) to give definitive answers to these and other questions that are being asked about that controversial document?

The water board members said at their meeting Monday night that they hope to get answers to

these questions from USGS officials when they meet with them on March 9. But for at least one water board member, that won't be enough. Director Dan Kriege said the USGS should "be required to come to this board and explain . . . why they do not like this report any more." Kriege also said that Rep. Leon Panetta should be asked to "look into the way the USGS operates."

It was also Kriege who asked why "Ken Muir (who wrote the report) is not available and (J.P.) Akers, who has been out of this area for seven or eight years, is now the spokesman." It was Akers who told the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors last week that the reported 1,000 acre feet a year overdraft in the Purisma formation within the district may or may not exist, and the methods used to determine it were questionable.

It was this report the water district used as a basis for imposition of a qualified moratorium on new water connections in the district until the overdraft is corrected. And, according to the district's General Manager Robert Johnson, about \$200,000 has

been spent by the district in planning and engineering for projects to provide new water sources, principally on the basis of the USGS report.

Monday night, it was Soquel resident Laurence Frommhagen who first brought the subject up. Frommhagen has been, if not the first, one of the most vocal critics of the USGS report. He asked the water board Monday night to make the March 9 meeting with USGS a public hearing and also asked that he be allowed to give testimony.

He was informed that this was a meeting between the staffs of the two agencies, and that "public input" would not be solicited. Frommhagen then said he was going to file suit against the district enjoining it from taking more water from the underground than it is entitled to. He said the district overlays only 44 percent of the Purisma formation, but it taking 55 percent of its water.

Board Chairman Ken Izant told Frommhagen that the board acted "in good faith" when it accepted the conclusions in the report, and commented that other interests, including the Santa Cruz Builders

Exchange, are hiring their own geologists to interpret the report.

"It looks like now we're going to have a number of reports," he said, but added that the moratorium will stay in effect "until we have more information."

The prospect of a sudden flood of new information prompted Director Mervin Garibotto to point out the district held two public hearings on the matter and made the USGS report available to the public through the libraries.

Then an audience member, a representative of a well-drilling firm, commented "It has been my experience that the USGS information is never accurate."

When the district hired the USGS to write the report, it, and the city of Santa Cruz, put up \$10,000 each, which was matched by a \$20,000 contribution by USGS in goods and services. The purpose was to update the data in the 1968 USGS report, which indicated a plentiful water supply until 1990.

"They came up with a report we thought was adequate," Kriege said. "It was in their (USGS) shop for two years and reviewed and

reviewed. Once it was published, all of a sudden they back away from it. There is an aroma about this I don't like."

Director Lawrence Bargetto was also critical of the district's consulting engineers, Montgomery Engineers, who were asked to analyze the USGS report. "It bothered me that they were ambiguous (about its conclusions)" Bargetto said.

The water district's legal counsel, Robert Bosso, was irked that USGS didn't come to the water district with its doubts. "They didn't tell us. We didn't know."

"We waited a year and were told the report was being reviewed at the highest level. But what we got is Akers — who was also a participant in the 1968 report — making these statements."

The only information the district now has about the report's validity, Bosso said, "is second and third hand."

"If the report is no good," Kriege declared, "They should stand up in public and say so."

The meeting between the staffs of the two agencies will be held March 9, at 10 a.m. in the Soquel Creek

County Water District office. It is open to the public.

In other business, directors:

—Granted a variance from the water connections moratorium to Seascope Corporation for water service to projects totaling 93 units. The variance was granted on the basis that Seascope would have qualified for the water connections had not their tentative map approval been delayed by litigation against the county. Seascope Vice President Dean Wise argued that the permits will not be in addition to those allowed under the moratorium, but will compete for only those permits allowed under the county's Measure J. The vote was 3-1 for approval, with Kriege voting against it and director Jack Beebe absent.

—Approved plans and specifications for a water main replacement project on Bonita Drive in Rio del Mar costing an estimated \$140,000. Bids will be opened April 3 at 2 p.m. at the district office, and work is to begin early in May.

—Accepted the bid of the Badger Company for \$27,243 for 1,447 water meters.