

Doubt Cast On Mid-County Water Report

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The reputation of the U.S. Geological Survey was badly tarnished this morning as serious doubt was cast on its 1980 report that underground water in mid-county is being heavily overdrafted.

Jay P. Akers of the USGS told county supervisors during hearings on a proposed expansion of the well drilling ban that data for the 1980 report left a lot to be desired and that the "state of the art" of hydrology leaves a lot of room for interpretation.

Supervisors were obviously confused at the testimony of Akers and water biologist Laurence Frommhagen, who was representing himself. At the end of the hearing, the board held off any action to expand the ban until staff has time to clear up the confusion with the USGS.

The public hearing will be resumed in

three weeks.

The county board has imposed a ban on wells within the Soquel Creek County Water District, which has its own ban on new water connections, except for those persons who are on the 1979 building permit allocation list.

Akers addressed the 1980 USGS report that stated the water basin is being overdrawn by 1,000 acre feet a year, a statement that was strongly contested by Frommhagen, who said the data which included water well levels was incomplete and left a lot to be desired.

Akers agreed there was insufficient data and in a way defended USGS hydrologist Ken Muir who made the report by saying he had made the best analysis he could based on the incomplete data.

Akers said that a good basis of data would require hundreds of thousands of

dollars worth of work and a few years' time.

He said that most hydrologists would agree that the main problem that is causing salt water intrusion into the coastal wells of the water district is that the district and the city of Santa Cruz have too many of their larger wells too close to the coast.

He recommended that the water districts drill inland to ease the burden on the coastal wells.

However, when Supervisor Dan Forbus asked him if drilling inland would be safe, Akers said that it would depend on the number of wells drilled, because there will be an accumulative impact even from inland wells on the ocean water's intrusion into the inland water basin.

As Akers concluded his testimony, Supervisors' Chairman Gary Patton said, "You're saying this (USGS report) is a

tissue of possibly misleading statements (and) you're saying the USGS has very little credibility."

Akers answered, "There is room for interpretation (and) I doubt that you can get a group of hydrologists to agree (an it)."

Patton asked, "What is the safe yield?" and Akers answered, "That will take a lot of drilling and I doubt if you can find out."

He explained that a "safe yield" amount would be a matter of whether salt water is flowing into the pure water basin and whether the water remained pure in other ways.

While it was not spoken at the meeting, the credibility gap that now seems driven into the heart of the USGS report will have to be addressed by the Soquel Creek water district and the county in regards to their bans on water connections and well drilling within the district.