

Districts may band together on water plan

GREEN SHEET
December 20, 1978

By BILL AKERS

The discovery that there is a whole lot less water underground than was supposed may lead to unprecedented cooperation between the major water districts in the northern two-thirds of Santa Cruz County. This cooperation will see present water supplies used to greater advantage and buy time for the districts until the day — 15 years or more from now — when more dams can be built in the mountains.

Already, the Soquel Creek County Water District is talking with the city of Santa Cruz on a plan to pump the wintertime surplus of Santa Cruz water into the mid-county, thereby easing the strain on the underground supply for four or five months a year. An agreement between those two agencies could be the forerunner of one also involving the San Lorenzo Valley and Scotts Valley water districts, under which all of the districts will share in the development of new water supplies.

Reporting to his directors Monday night, Robert Johnson, engineer-manager of the Soquel Creek district, indicated this does not necessarily mean the formation of a super water agency in the county, but said, "We can't all stand alone." By working together the districts could maintain their individuality, he said, and still cooperate on the development of water supplies.

What brought the talks with Santa Cruz on was the startling discovery that the underground water supply, from which the Soquel Creek district draws all its water, is less than half what it was thought to be.

A 1968 water study indicated that the underground forma-

tion from which the district pumps its water had a "safe annual yield" of around 10,000 acre feet per year. It was upon this figure that the district predicated its long range capital improvement program which calls for enlargement of the present system and the building of a dam and reservoir to handle an estimated 1997 population of 50,000 people.

Believing that the 10,000 acre feet estimate was based on incomplete data, the Soquel Creek district called in the U.S. Geological Survey to take a reading on the underground supply based on newer and more accurate data.

Earlier this month they were stunned to learn that the underground safe yield, instead of being 10,000 acre feet a year, is closer to 4,000 acre feet. With the district now pumping about 3,500 acre feet a year to supply water to the present 20,000 population, it is very near the limit to what it can safely pump.

Johnson said the new figures are "very conservative," and the written report by USGS won't be out until after the first of the year, but that he doesn't expect the final figures to be much different than those given orally to the district by a USGS representative a couple of weeks ago.

With the cushion of only 500 acre feet to work with, the district must either find new sources of water or hold consumption close to present levels. While an embargo on new water connections is not being considered, Johnson said it is certainly one of the alternatives open to district directors. If an embargo is imposed, it would amount to

another building ban in the midcounty.

District officials don't have a whole lot of time to come up with a solution. At present, the district has 10,000 water connections and is expanding at an average rate of about 30 connections per month. The average water use per connection is .4 of an acre foot annually, Johnson says, leaving the district with about 1,250 connections it can add until the safe annual yield limit is reached. Statistically, this figures out to a time limit of between three and four years before the limit is reached. At that time the district must have augmented its water supply or call a halt to further expansion.

The plan Johnson and Santa Cruz water officials are talking about is this: In the summer months, the districts will continue to pump from the underground supply. (Santa Cruz takes about 1,000 acre feet a year from the same stratum that Soquel Creek does.) In the winter, when Santa Cruz has a surplus of water in its mountain surface reservoirs, some of that surplus will be piped into the midcounty and the underground pumping will be eased.

Just how much water can be borrowed this way is not known precisely at this time, nor the cost of doing it, Johnson said. "The capacity of the Santa Cruz system is the limitation," he declared. At first, Johnson told his directors, only Capitola and Soquel would be served in this manner.

To serve Aptos, a couple of alternatives are being considered. One would be to construct a water transmission line from Soquel Creek into Aptos. The district's capital improvement plan calls for construction of a transmission line from the proposed Glenwood dam site down Soquel Creek and then into Aptos. Johnson said the Soquel Creek-Aptos portion could be constructed now in order to use the surplus Santa Cruz water, and then be incorporated into the full system when the Glenwood dam is built sometime in the future.

Another alternative for Aptos would be the development of the water supplies in Soquel and Aptos Creeks. This would also involve the construction of treatment plants so the water could be used for domestic purposes.

Johnson told his directors that he had no firm figures on how much water any of these plans would provide nor how much it would cost to carry them out, but he would have some recommendations after the first of the year.

Director Dan Kriege said, "We're talking about very expensive water."

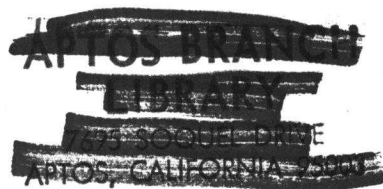
Johnson replied, "What we're doing is buying time." He told the directors that an agreement with Santa Cruz would include, in addition to the sharing of surplus water, some decision on the development of Zayante and Glenwood dams.

The Soquel Creek district has planned all along on the development of the Glenwood dam. It has an agreement with the Scotts Valley water district declaring both districts' intent to develop that dam and reservoir.

Santa Cruz has been working for several years on the development of the Zayante dam. Most of the property for the dam and reservoir site has been acquired, and the city is now proceeding with seismic and environmental impact reports. But development of that dam is still 15 years down the road, Johnson said.

Presumably, the two agencies will decide whether the Zayante or Glenwood dams — or possibly both — should be developed.

Johnson said he sees the coming year as being "historic" in terms of water development, with the major districts finally agreeing, after years of talk, to cooperate on the development of common water supplies.



REFERENCE