

Pajaro water agency to buy land

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WATSONVILLE — After more than three years of study and negotiations, the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency has reached an agreement to buy an 82-acre parcel adjacent to College Lake near the county fairgrounds.

Acquiring the land, owned by Ted Remde, is central to the agency's plans to build a 27-foot dam at the drainage exit of the lake. Plans call for a reservoir to ease a water shortage exacerbated by saltwater intrusion into the groundwater.

The reservoir would hold 10,000 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is roughly the amount of water used by a family of four in one year.

"It's a large step for the agency," said agency general manager Mike Armstrong. "In and of itself, the 82 acres won't build the dam and create the reservoir, but I see this move as a symbol of commitment about proceeding with the project. It's the biggest public thing we've done so far."

On Monday, the agency's board of directors had submitted an offer of between \$350,000 and \$400,000 to Remde for the property. The exact amount is contingent on an outside appraisal of the property's value. Armstrong said Remde had accepted that offer.

Remde was unavailable for comment Tuesday.

Acquisition of the land enables the agency to move toward its long-range goal of building a dam.

Remde also had been offered \$400,000 for the property by the federal Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, which wanted to create a wetlands preserve on the property, Armstrong said. Both agencies had set Monday deadlines for acceptance.

"I understand that Mr. Remde has withdrawn the option (with the federal agency) for the wetlands easement," Armstrong said.

Acquisition of the land, for which the water agency is to issue a promissory note within 90 days, enables the agency to move toward its long-range goal of building a dam. The dam construction is the third of three phases, according to Armstrong.

Armstrong said the agency has begun installing gauges at the lake to determine how much water is lost through overflow. That is the prelude to the first phase, which involves constructing a series of wells. Those would take

water that is pumped to the ocean in the spring, when farmers drain their land, and inject it into the lake's aquifer, a water-bearing layer of rock.

The second phase would involve construction of a pipeline from College Lake to the coast. Water would then be piped from College Lake and distributed as needed to farmers along its route.

Finally, the dam would be built. It would hold about 3,400 acre-feet of water, and would retain overflow from Corralitos Creek as well as the water that naturally flows into College Lake.

If the project is found to be impractical or too costly, the dam project could be abandoned and the land resold.

Two years ago, a Monterey County grand jury criticized the water agency and other water agencies in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties for failing to move toward long-term water projects. The grand jury said at the time that no project had reached the construction stage in the area since the 1960s.

Because of saltwater intrusion and drought, more fresh water is being pumped out of the Pajaro Valley than nature was providing. An ordinance passed by the agency in August requires farmers and other large water users to equip their wells with meters to monitor their water use.