

# Water agency takes major step toward pipeline

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WATSONVILLE — The first step toward solving the Pajaro Valley's groundwater overdraft and saltwater intrusion problems by building a \$106 million pipeline to import water was approved Wednesday night by Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency directors.

The approval came after directors heard the same arguments they've heard at several previous hearings: Proponents say that without the pipeline, the overdraft and saltwater intrusion will only get worse for the valley's farmers.

But farmers say the cost could bankrupt them. Most of those who

spoke urged the Water Management Agency to consider less-costly alternatives.

The pipeline would bring Central Valley water to the Pajaro Valley from a pipeline that already reaches as far west as the Gilroy area.

Montgomery Watson, the engineering firm hired to prepare a study on the pipeline, had an original estimate of \$134 million.

Last month, agency directors indicated they didn't feel an inland distribution system is necessary, which would save \$28 million.

Without an inland distribution system, farmers would still use

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groundwater. Because coastal farmers would be using pipeline water, there would be more groundwater available inland.

The vote Wednesday night was not for the pipeline itself, but to raise the agency's fee for taking water out of the ground from \$35 an acre foot to \$55 an acre foot, effective July 1. An acre foot covers an acre a foot high with water.

To pay for the pipeline, the fee would have to go up another \$15 or \$20 a year for seven or eight years. Farmers would pay the brunt of that cost.

While directors made it clear they were voting for or against the pipeline, it's not an irreversible decision. Some preliminary studies and negotiations can begin this year, but it will be two years before directors will face a point-of-no-return on the pipeline.

The vote was 4-2, with Jack Edsberg and Bill Jensen opposed. In favor were Gwen Carroll, Steve Garrett, Brad Bennett and Howard Mauthe. Ed Kelly was absent.

"I firmly believe that agriculture can't spend that kind of money and sustain itself," said Jensen, an apple farmer.

Although most of those who spoke opposed the pipeline, Bennett said he has talked to people "who are supporting what the agency is doing."

Without the pipeline, Bennett said, the state is liable to solve the Pajaro Valley's problems by reducing allocations.

Carroll said she had doubts when she became a director last year, but now believes "we have to do something. We've got to think about our future."

A few farmers who spoke last night questioned whether scientists and the Water Management Agency overestimated the severity of the valley's water problems. One Springfield district farmer, who refused to give his name, said his water quality is the same as it was in 1969.

Charlie McNiesh of the Water Management Agency staff said monitoring wells show problems with saltwater intrusion along the coast and a declining groundwater supply, although there can be sites that don't show a problem.

Mike Jani, president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, acknowledged that there's a saltwater intrusion problem, but urged agency directors to "provide a product first" before going ahead with a decision on the pipeline.

The Farm Bureau came out against the pipeline last week.

The Water Management Agency, formed in 1984, does not provide water, but works to coordinate water usage, primarily for agricultural use.

"The small farmer can't afford it," said Ellen Hutchings, who has been farming in North Monterey County