

Salt-water threat to farming grows

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Salt water is again creeping into the Pajaro Valley's coastal water supply, a water consultant said this morning.

Water consultant Joe Scalmanini said that new data collected in the Pajaro Valley shows that the underground water levels are dropping steadily and farmers pumping from coastal zone wells are discovering salt water.

"The 'Miracle March Rains' really weren't a miracle here," Scalmanini told a water forum this morning at Aptos' Seacliff Inn.

Tests show that the underground water levels were rising slightly last winter — as is normal for the winter months. But instead of seeing a large increase in the underground levels following the March rains, Scalmanini said, water levels began dropping again in April as farmers began pumping more irrigation water from the ground.

Scalmanini will present an analysis of the Pajaro Valley's water situation at the regular meeting of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Watsonville City Council chambers.

While overdraft and seawater intrusion have been apparent in local wells since the 1940s, a monitoring system installed a few years ago indicates salt penetration is occurring at a rapid pace, agency officials are saying.

March readings show the coastal farming areas in the San Andreas Road and Palm Beach vicinity with significant salt pollution. The Springfield Terrace area in Moss Landing and other properties located south of the Pajaro River also recorded continuing intrusion.

Scalmanini said this morning that the terrace area is experiencing salt-water intrusion at a faster rate than the areas around the mouth of the Pajaro River.

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For years, coastal growers have wrestled with the problem and adjusted planting plans accordingly. "They can only grow certain crops now that can withstand the salt," said Janie Schuyler, an administrative assistant with the water agency.

What water officials are attempting to get across to the public is that a lowered water table is everyone's problem, not just the agricultural industry's.

Supplemental water is one way of combatting the problem, and is an alternative currently being pursued by agency-sanctioned committees studying conservation programs. Their first reports are to be presented in August.

The five monitoring wells established by the agency measure water supplies at the shallow, middle and deep levels. In his presentation, Scalmanini will show charts and point out where salt-water seepage is most prevalent.

On the other hand, there is not a water crisis in the Midcounty area where the Soquel Creek Water District pumps 5,000 acre-feet or more each year.

Even during the last five years

of drought, the water district has been able to halt a decline in the underground water levels in the Capitola-Seacliff area and the levels have been steadily rising for the last three years.

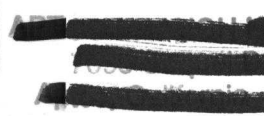
Scalmanini, who began working for the Soquel Creek district in the early 1980s, oversaw a \$1 million-plus project to map the underground water basins in the Capitola, Soquel, Aptos and La Selva Beach areas, to find out if there was any evidence of salt-water intrusion and tell the water district how much it could safely pump from the underground aquifers.

Small monitoring wells were drilled along the coast and inland to measure the underground water pressure and measure the quality of the water.

In general, the water pressure in the underground water strata is several feet higher than sea level, meaning that seawater from Monterey Bay can't move inland and infiltrate the fresh-water supplies.

Water levels in the Capitola area dropped below sea level in the 1980s, Scalmanini said, but the water district has been able to steadily bring those levels back up to above-sea-level by shifting the pumping patterns for its production wells in the Soquel Valley.

REFERENC



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