

WATER SUPPLY Pay-per-spray plan



Farm workers prepare to lay sprinkler pipe for irrigation along East Beach Street in Watsonville.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Water agency pursues usage plan

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WATSONVILLE — The agency that manages the Pajaro Valley's water supply is pursuing an unprecedented plan to charge farmers and others a fee for using water.

The pay-per-spray charges are linked to an ambitious and costly proposal to install meters that measure water use on about one-third of the Pajaro water basin's estimated 3,000 wells. Currently, farmers and residents pay the costs associated with pumping the water out of the ground — such as electric bills — but not

for the water itself.

Under the planned fees, a farmer who sows 100 acres and uses 200 acre feet of water a year — one acre foot equals 336,000 gallons — would be charged an estimated \$50 per acre foot, or \$10,000 a year, with payments due semi-annually.

The Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency says it needs the fees to build capital toward solving with the area's serious supply problems, including the intrusion of sea water into the underground basin.

State regulators have repeatedly threatened to take the reins of

the PV water supply if the local agency doesn't come up with a comprehensive plan to not only halt the seeping invasion of salt water — caused primarily by pumping too much water out of the ground — but to also address the area's future water needs through a variety of proposed storage, reclamation and conservation projects.

The first step is an ordinance exacting an "augmentation" fee that will be used to offset the expensive costs of installing well meters and associated hardware on an estimated 1,000 of the basin's biggest water users.

The agency's director, Mike Armstrong, estimates that purchasing and installing the meters will be a \$4 million undertaking, and that the agency can't "pay for it without some kind of revenue."

The agency hopes to have all the major users of well water in the basin identified by August — some stragglers still haven't registered — and a formal metering and fee plan ready for public comment by May. Users who refuse to register their wells face a fine as high as \$500.

In the meantime, agency lead-

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ers need to decide what wells warrant metering, and where those wells are located, said Armstrong.

"We're talking about a fairly detailed level of effort here," he said. There is a multitude of actions that have to occur and it's going to take time and it's going to take resources."

Under the plan, domestic wells wouldn't be metered but instead residents would pay a charge based on the estimated amount of water they consume in a year,

probably around \$12 annually, far lower than agricultural users.

"There are some great inequities in all that," admitted Armstrong, but "the concept is, everybody in this valley will pay their proportionate share for pumping water out of the groundwater basin."

"Clearly because agriculture uses some 75 percent of the all of the water used ... they would be providing 75 percent of the total dollars."

About half of the 76,000 people who live atop the Pajaro Valley

basin use wells as the source of their water. Most of the others are connected to the city of Watsonville's water system.

Never have wells been metered in the Pajaro Valley, but the idea of tracking water use is not new; it was first floated back in the mid-'80s. And after years of false starts and suspicion, most area farmers now appear to support the idea.

The Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau has endorsed installation of meters on the wells of high-end water users, as long as the agency pays for the meters and then spreads the installation costs to meter users over a five-year period.

"Since farms use most of the water, they have a responsibility to work toward viable solutions," said Farm Bureau president Kirk Schmidt earlier this month.

Flower grower Steve Siri said the basin's water woes dictate that metered wells be somewhat of a necessary evil for the area's agriculture industry.

"Naturally, nobody likes to pay for water, especially when you're paying the electric bill on top of it, but if you're going to have a method to pay, probably the fairest method is by use," said Siri.

Whether the added overhead of paying for water will threaten the economic stability of some farmers remains to be seen, said Siri.

Tom Am Rhein, a small-scale strawberry grower and former Farm Bureau president, said he doesn't see meters "being a significant factor cost-wise."

Am Rhein worries, though, that future water agency projects — ranging from the construction of reservoirs to hooking up to the federal Central Valley Project — may be financed primarily by the agriculture industry.

"The water charge that will result from metering, I don't have a problem with that," said Am Rhein. "But ... the problem is (the agency) is not being very specific about the cost of the water projects."