

There's plenty of water for farmers, agency told

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Further discussion of a recent study about water supply brought two rarely spoken concepts into the spotlight yesterday when the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency met in a study session.

An agency consultant challenged the idea that importing water is necessary, while one board member examined the real possibility that farming may vanish as a local industry, thus reducing the need for water.

The agency was created two years ago expressly to insure that farmers have adequate water. The most significant alternative that has been considered to insure that supply is the option of importing water from the San Felipe Project.

The agency must decide by October if it will send a letter of intent to the Bureau of Reclamation, the first step in claiming its rights to 19,000 acre-feet of water originally set aside for the Pajaro Valley when San Felipe was built.

Several studies have indicated differing water supplies and rates of consumption. The most recent study conducted by Woodland consultant Joseph Scalmanini, of the firm

Luhdorff and Scalmanini, under contract with the agency, states that water supply is strong. The study concludes there is not much depletion of the approximate 2 million acre-feet in groundwater storage. The study seems to offer little evidence that water importation is needed.

"Exactly what in your report would help justify a letter of intent to the bureau?" board member and flower grower Steve Dautoff asked.

"In real blunt terms, not a lot," Scalmanini answered.

If the agency based its importation vote only on the Scalmanini study it would be "placing all its eggs in one basket," agency manager Craig French pointed out. Scalmanini urged that well monitoring be started to double-check his study's conclusion over time.

Research for the study was based on interviews with area farmers about past and current water use, and on data collected after measuring water pumping rates and resulting changes in water levels.

Scalmanini said that in all his contacts he found no farmer who expressed a need for more water.

Given that current and near-future water supplies are ade-

quate for farming, board members then speculated if imported water was needed.

Water board Chairman Brad Bennett forced deeper evaluation of the question when he said he doubted if farming would still be a viable occupation in 50 years. He said economic disadvantages, such as land rent and labor costs and growth pressures pushing in on local farmers may end the industry, thus eliminating the need to import water to maintain agriculture.

"Why should a farmer pay to import water," Bennett asked, "when the someone of tomorrow who will benefit, probably won't be a farmer?"