

Water crisis deepens

Overdraft threatens county's agriculture

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WATSONVILLE — The Pajaro Valley illegally pumps vast amounts of water out of the ground to meet a critical shortage, and local leaders fear a state crackdown. The grim news, which puts South County agriculture at risk, was delivered to the community by an all-star panel of engineers, political leaders and local growers during a community forum at the Mello Center Friday.

"We don't have a solution for you," said U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel. "The federal government is not starting any more water projects and this current situation is illegal. We're in violation of the law, and sooner or later somebody is going to slam the door shut."

Withdrawals from the aquifer are governed by the state Water Resources Control Board, which is charged, among other things, with maintaining the health of the state's underground water supplies.

The valley needs 70,000 acre-feet of water per year but the area's aquifer can only yield 30,000 acre-feet per year without depleting it and exacerbating the salt water-intrusion problem, the experts say. Within 30 years that shortfall is expected to top 48,000 acre-feet annually.

An acre-foot is the amount of water it takes to cover one acre of land with one foot of water.

Because the federal government is getting out of the water business and the state Legislature failed to approve a water bond, "you residents are going to have to get your acts together, support something and pay for it," Farr said.

Giving the state's perspective, Assemblyman Fred Keeley, D-Boulder Creek, said the valley has only two options now — making massive changes and moving from

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Ernesto Moreno of Peixoto Farms adjusts a sprinkler head along Riverside Drive Friday afternoon. The Pajaro Valley is overdrawing from its aquifer by about 40,000 acre-feet a year.

an agricultural base to a residential/industrial base or seeking local solutions. He said all the studies indicate that a piecemeal approach will help, but the overdraft is so massive it requires a massive fix.

"Local solution numbers don't add up," Keeley said. "Saving five or six thousand acre-feet here and there is not enough. To stay agriculturally based, the rest of it has to come through imported water."

Some limited local solutions

were explained by Watsonville Director of Public Works David Koch. He said if the city pumps its water farther inland and increases its use of surface water, it could gain 500 acre-feet per year.

The city's wastewater treatment plant could be upgraded and produce 7,000 acre-feet of reclaimed water per year, Koch said — but even purified wastewater is too salty for strawberries.

To correct the salinity problem with reverse osmosis is too expen-

sive Koch said. "It would take \$7 million up front and the cost of the water would be between \$650 and \$700 per acre-foot."

Retrofitting toilets and showers to use less water would save approximately 500 acre-feet per year.

The most ambitious local solution was offered by Charles McNiesh, interim director of Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency.

It entails a three-part project that he said could be accomplished with existing funds. McNiesh's

plan involved creation of a Watsonville/Harkins Slough diversion, construction of additional storage and diversion facilities at College Lake, and building a diversion facility at Murphy Crossing.

That water could then be pumped toward the coast and into percolation basins.

"Construction could start in 1999 and we could be in operation by 2000," McNiesh said. "All three

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plans combined could generate an additional 5,000 acre-feet per year."

It is estimated that stopping all pumping near the coast would save an additional 20,000 acre-feet, but engineer Lyndel Melton said that figure has been disputed by several experts and the savings could be considerably less.

"When added up, all the possible local solutions offered at the forum still leave a huge deficit," said Sam Earnshaw, director of the Community Alliance of Family Farmers. That deficit is estimated to be approximately 20,000 acre-feet per year, but that is a nebulous number.

None of the studies have been able to produce a definitive figure.

Both Pajaro Valley grower Dick Peixoto and Earnshaw said the project that would cost the least has the potential for saving the most water.

"Another major area of water resource development is the field of water conservation," Earnshaw said. "There are many examples in California where significant amounts of water have been saved through conservation programs."

Peixoto said the conservation studies done so far are not complete and were based on bringing the heaviest users down to average levels.

"There have been no studies on

bringing growers down to most efficient use," Peixoto said, "but that could yield enough to get us close to making up for the deficit."

McNiesh and Keeley disagree with Peixoto's opinion and have both gone on record as saying eventually, water must be imported to the valley if agriculture is to remain viable in the coming years.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor-elect Tony Campos summed up the situation. "If we don't plan for the future, we are planning to fail," Campos said. "We aren't going to build a reservoir like Lexington; it's just not going to happen. Everyone must share the cost and everyone must participate in the solution."