

# Desalinization: High cost for fresh water

By KEITH MURAOKA

Sentinel staff writer

**SOQUEL** — High cost appears to rule out any possibility that the Soquel Creek Water District will ever build desalinization plants.

In a report to the water board Tuesday night, general manager Bob Johnson said desalinization — the process of turning seawater into fresh water — could raise water bills anywhere from five to seven times more than what the Mid-County water district now charges its customers.

The water board asked staff to investigate the cost and process of desalinization in the wake of a fifth straight drought year. Marin, Morro Bay and Catalina Island have operating plants, and the war in the Persian Gulf also brought Saudi Arabia's desalinization plants into the limelight.

Assistant general manager Mike Munson said recent studies put the cost of seawater desalinization at \$2,000 to \$3,000 per acre foot. The district now spends about \$380 an acre foot for water it pumps from underground aquifers.

Much of the high cost results from energy required to either boil the water, needed in the steam distillation process, or power pumps to force fresh water through a series of fine membranes, Munson said.

According to Johnson, the water district is already pursuing what

appears to be the most economical way of supplementing its underground water supply. The district has long proposed to build a six-acre holding pond or "diversion dam" on Soquel Creek. Johnson said cost estimates for such surface water are 30 to 50 percent more than what the district currently pays, but is far less than the 500 to 700 percent increase of desalinization.

A site just west of Fairway Drive in Soquel has been identified, and the district is now investigating which way to move in the environmental-impact report process. Consultant Denise Duffy and Associates of Monterey has been hired.

In other business, Johnson reported that the district's \$450,000 Capitola Village water main project is just two weeks from completion. The three-month project is replacing 3-, 6- and 8-inch water mains in downtown Capitola with a 12-inch line to improve both water service and fire protection.

The project was delayed from last summer by the Capitola City Council after council members adhered to complaints from downtown shop owners, who were worried the construction project would hamper business.