

Water worries are part of the county fabric

By JAMIE MARKS
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THERE'S NOTHING like a drought to get everybody thinking about water. And in this third year of drought, the interest is heightened even further.

Depending on where you live in Santa Cruz County, your water situation is either dire, bad but not critical, or OK but nothing to feel smug about.

The most pressing problem for the majority of county residents is that there just isn't enough water to go around; that is, clean, fresh water, suitable for drinking. For although there's plenty of water to look at, little of it is useful unless you're a sea-loving creature or happen to know someone who can build a desalinization plant.

Whether water is plentiful or not, everyone is looking at ways to ensure that the future holds enough clean water to sustain a comfortable lifestyle in this bucolic bayside community.

The 90,000 customers of the Santa Cruz water system are well aware of the water shortage, as they've been restricting their water use since March 1 in hopes of avoiding mandatory rationing later this year. The district serves Live Oak and parts of Capitola, as well as the city of Santa Cruz.

The situation for Santa Cruz is critical because the system relies on surface water almost entirely. Because there has been so little rainfall in the past three years, the main storage area at Loch Lomond Reservoir is considerably depleted.

The Loch Lomond Reservoir near Ben Lomond has a capacity of 8,600 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is the amount of water it would take to cover one acre with a foot of water.

Bill Kocher, head of the Santa Cruz Water Department, has recommended the city look at developing a new reservoir of about the same size as Loch Lomond to avoid water restrictions in the next 20 years.

In the Santa Cruz Mountains, some of the small, private water systems are in worse shape.

The Mountain Charlie water system, serving about 140 families at the summit, has had to truck in water since last summer, when an earthquake cracked one of the system's main holding tanks, which then had to be drained for repair.

Since the minor jolt, the system's water sources have been reduced to a trickle, forcing the company to truck the water up mountainous roads from Scotts Valley at an exorbitant price to the residents.

Worse yet, many private wells in the Santa Cruz Mountains have gone dry and the creeks that should be moving swiftly are nothing but trickles.

The water situation is quite different in Scotts Valley, Watsonville and anywhere served by the Soquel Creek County Water District. These areas

pump their water out of the ground, where storage capacity runs into the millions of acre-feet.

One of the main worries of groundwater users is quality of water, not quantity. For once a groundwater source is contaminated, it's virtually impossible to clean up.

Scotts Valley Water District General Manager Jon Sansing said his district is in the process of upgrading its water-treatment plant by installing activated carbon filters, which will not only improve the taste and odor of the water but take care of any synthetic organic materials in it.

The district had one scare with TCE, trichloroethylene, a toxic solvent used in the high-tech industry. But Sansing said the contamination never reached the maximum safety level established by the Environmental Protection Agency. As a precaution, that well hasn't been used in 18 months, and any water extracted will be blended with other sources.

The high-tech firm Watkins-Johnson has had to spend millions of dollars cleaning up the water around its industrial site in Scotts Valley. Company officials believe a disgruntled former employee dumped 55 gallons of TCE into one of its production wells.

The EPA is overseeing that cleanup, which, according to Sansing, is several years ahead of schedule.

Some folks along the south coast and in the Pajaro Valley area are experiencing another kind of problem with the quality of water they draw.

Saltwater is intruding into wells at the coast, and nitrates, which come from fertilizers and septic systems, are seeping into some of the groundwater supplies, according to Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency Executive Director Craig French.

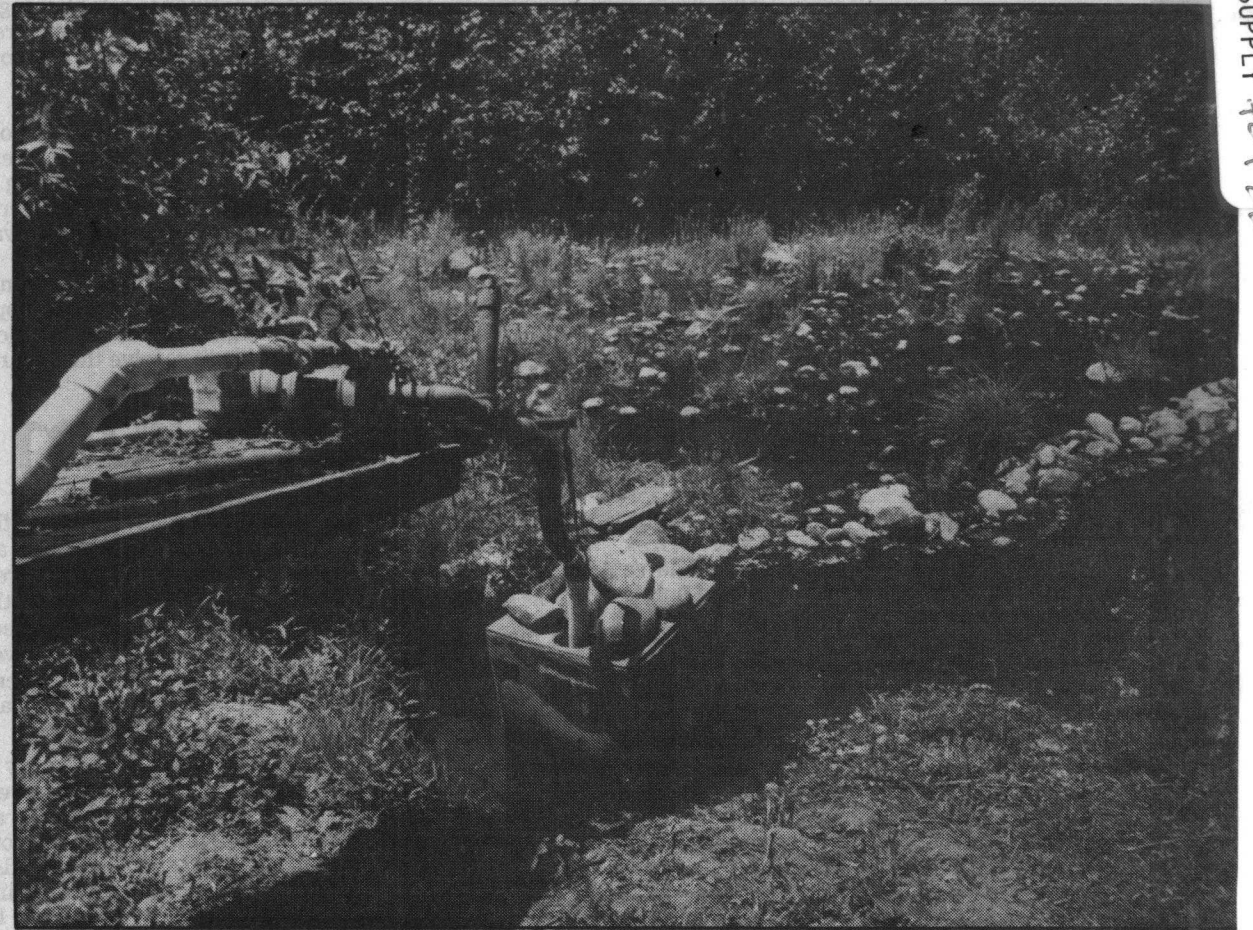
The Pajaro Valley agency was established in 1984 to monitor the water situation in an area that covers parts of Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey counties.

French said the agency is working on a groundwater management plan and computer model that will help the agency decide how best to use the water it has.

The information collected over some 30 years indicates the Pajaro Valley uses more water than is replenished every year.

The quality of some wells is deteriorating because saltwater has been moving steadily into inland wells. Additionally, nitrate contamination has cropped up in isolated spots throughout the boundaries of the Pajaro Valley water agency, French said.

One option the Pajaro Valley water agency has that others in the county don't is that of importing water. The agency is developing information to help it decide if it will need to import almost 20,000 acre-feet of water a year from the San Luis Reservoir near Los Banos.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Soquel Creek was reduced to a trickle at times because of this year's drought.

The project will be expensive, costing about \$50 million.

Watsonville officials are watching the groundwater situation closely, but don't foresee any need for rationing at this point.

"We have an adequate supply, but we do recognize that water conservation efforts should be made, not just for the drought year but for the long term," said David Koch, assistant public works director for Watsonville.

The city is working with the Pajaro Valley water agency to develop a municipal water conservation program for the agency's master water plan, Koch said.

Even the huge Monterey Bay isn't immune from contamination. A recent report by the State Mussel

Watch Marine Monitoring Program has shown increases in the levels of certain toxic substances associated with agricultural spraying.

Reports from the Salinas Reclamation Canal revealed DDT levels of 2.6 parts per million, above the 1.0 ppm recommendation by National Academy of Sciences.

In an effort to keep better tabs on the Monterey Bay's water quality, Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, ushered through legislation which designated it a marine sanctuary. A task force is devising guidelines for preserving the bay.

Toward a cleaner bay, both Watsonville and Santa Cruz are upgrading their sewage treatment facilities. Watsonville's plant is on line, but the Santa Cruz facility is several years away from completion.