

Water agency maps imported water plan

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — Like the federal government, the people of the Pajaro Valley are overspending a limited resource, according to David McCabe, general manager of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency.

In the case of the Pajaro Valley, that resource is not money but water.

"Today a vast majority of us have come to realize that our water resources are greatly limited, that we in fact are engaged in deficit spending of this resource. Just like our federal government, we use more

than we take in," McCabe said in a recently issued agency newsletter.

He was referring to the fact that Pajaro Valley agricultural and municipal water uses require pumping more from underground water resources — the Valley's main supply — than is naturally reabsorbed. Decades of overpumping have caused sea water to creep into coastal water supplies, rendering them useless for drinking and irrigation.

What the agency plans to do about the deficit, estimated to reach

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28,000 acre feet (an acre foot is 325,900 gallons) by 2040, was the subject of a community meeting at Alianza School last night.

A key component of the plan is an estimated \$100 million 22-mile pipeline project that calls for tapping into a federal water project to import water supplies to this area.

Imported water is needed to make up the water shortfall because wastewater reclamation and other projects that expand local sources of water can only supply 14 percent of the amount needed, said Lynn Melton, an engineer studying the feasibility of the pipeline project.

He explained the variables the pipeline study will examine to agen-

cy board members, consultants and the handful of community members who attended the meeting.

Who will supply the water the agency will import and at what cost is a key issue, he said.

Contending options are collecting a federal water entitlement granted in the 1960s, making cooperative arrangements with the Santa Clara Valley Water district or another agency willing to sell surplus water or buying it on the market.

Gaining access to the federal allocation temporarily held up under a moratorium probably would be cheaper than buying it on the open market, Melton said. Federal water would cost an estimated \$100 an acre foot while buying water from another agency would run from \$100 to \$150 per acre foot, he said.

Legislation that would allow the

Pajaro Valley to collect that allotment before the moratorium is lifted was introduced by U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, to the House of Representatives at the beginning of November.

Another big question mark is how to store and distribute imported water, Melton said.

The cheapest way to store the water is to take advantage of natural underground storage capacities, he said.

The idea is that allowing farmers to use piped water for irrigation instead of pumping from wells, will stop overdrafting, allow ground water levels to rise, and eventually, halt sea water intrusion.

Using this "in-lieu" ground water recharge method may save water users quite a bit of money, keeping the cost of an acre foot of water under \$200 compared to an estimated \$800

if a surface storage area is involved, he said.

These and other uncertainties will be examined in a 14-month study conducted by Melton's employer, Montgomery Watson, a San Francisco-

based engineering company.

Work on the feasibility study began six weeks ago. The Five-year pipeline project will include many opportunities for public input, planners said.