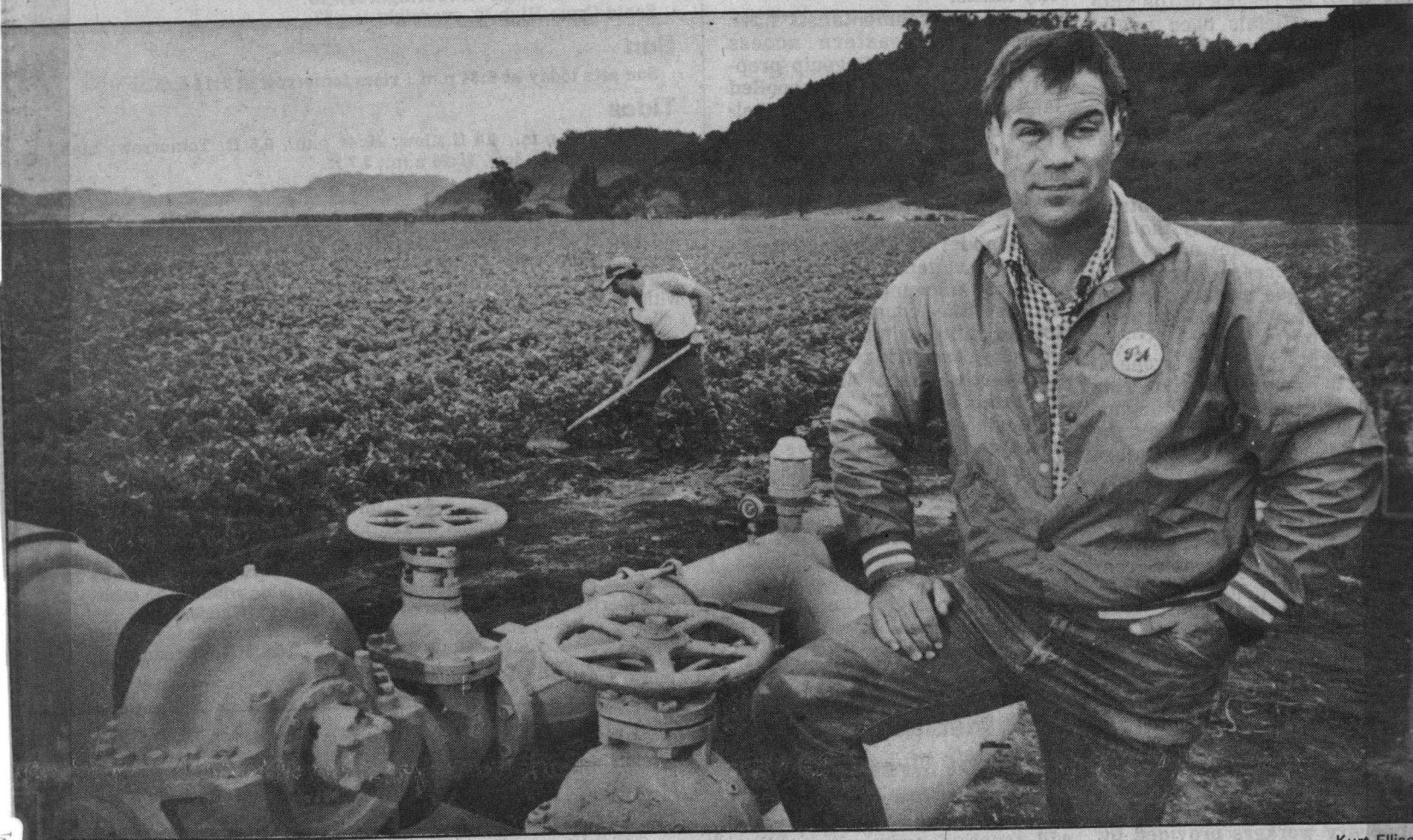


The politics of water



By ELIZABETH SCHILLING
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Tomorrow could be an historic date for the Watsonville area, but its significance may not be apparent for many years.

For it is tomorrow that the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency must declare its intentions about importing water from the San Felipe Project.

At least, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has told the agency that if it eventually wants to obtain its allocation of water from the project it will have to file a "letter of intent" this month or lose its claim on the water.

It might seem to the casual observer that this would pose no dilemma at all, that the agency would be remiss in its duty not

to sign up for an allocation of water that might someday be needed.

But it's not that simple.

To begin with, there is no shortage of water in the area serviced by the water agency now and there are those who say there is no reason to believe there ever will be. At least, there is enough water for agriculture and for existing residential and commercial uses,

those people say, so that importing more water would only be another spur to unwanted growth.

They also point out that importing the water could prove so costly that farmers couldn't afford to pay for it.

Those in favor of sending the letter of intent insist that it would be just that — a signal of the agency's "intent" to import water some day — and not a firm commitment to do so.

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They say it would be irresponsible to forfeit the opportunity to import the water if it's ever needed.

But opponents say sending the letter is the equivalent of making a deal with the devil. They say once the water agency indicates its intention to import water, the Bureau of Reclamation will begin to call the shots and it will chart a one-way route to imported water.

During a recent visit to Watsonville, representatives of the federal agency reminded local water agency directors that they had to file their letter of intent by the end of this month, but also assured them that the

letter would not bind the district to import the San Felipe water. They said it would mean only that negotiations could begin and that a final contract wouldn't be signed until 1990.

All of these factors, combined with some conflicting reports from experts on the water situation in the area, must be considered when the water agency directors meet tomorrow to make their decision.

"My gut reaction says we're crazy not to take the water," said agency chairman Brad Bennett. "But it's hard to justify that feeling when the last report does not strongly support

Water agency chairman Brad Bennett knows how important water is to this area.

Agency board faces critical decision

Kurt Ellison

the need for water. In either case, the letter itself is not such a big deal."

The report Bennett referred to was done for the agency by Woodland consultant Joseph Scalmanini, of the firm Luhdorff and Scalmanini. It contradicts earlier reports that concluded there was saltwater intrusion and permanent depletion of groundwater. The Scalmanini report concludes there has not been significant depletion of the 2 million acre-feet of water estimated to be in groundwater storage in the agency area.

Agency Director Diane Cooley says she will probably vote to send the letter of intent because she believes that the ensuing negotiations will help focus water issues.

"It's at least important to send in the letter so we're on line to defend our course of action when our ultimate decision is made," said Cooley. "I'm still going to be very open-minded in looking at alternatives, but it's time we get specifics into the discussion."

Cooley is not particularly thrilled about the decision facing her. There is no easy vote in this case, she says.

"If I vote yes I'm fulfilling my obligation to review all feasible options for water supply and quality," she said. "By not even considering the letter I'm saying no to the whole thing before knowing anything about the cost, the environmental consequences and other serious considerations that a decision must be based on. I don't think sending the letter puts our train on the track with the whistle blowing full toward importing."

Perhaps the most vocal and most skeptical among the agency's seven directors is flower grower Steve Dautoff. He

That dam formed the San Luis Reservoir, from which comes the water for the San Felipe Project.

Construction of the three-pronged San Felipe Project began in the '70s. The Santa Clara Valley was first to sign up for its allocation and, beginning last June, will be receiving 16,000 acre-feet of water annually; that allocation will grow to 152,000 acre-feet in the next century. The second leg, supplying San Benito County, also began operating in June and will eventually ship 43,800 acre-feet for distribution from the Hollister area.

The final phase of the San Felipe project is the yet-to-be-built "Watsonville sub-area," which would deliver 19,900 acre-feet of water a year via canals or pipes to be constructed along Highway 129.

Thirty-five miles of tunnels and pipes currently transport water from the San Luis Reservoir over Pacheco Pass to destinations in Santa Clara and

thinks the letter of intent would mean full steam ahead for the importation option. All the agency's resources, he thinks, would be spent just trying to justify the idea of importing.

"By sending the letter of intent we are really committed," said Dautoff. "Once we get going the bureau won't tolerate any monkey business. They aren't interested in us reviewing alternatives, or in making an objective decision. Once we send the letter we're on the fast track to importing."

He said that after the meeting between the federal bureau and the agency directors earlier this month, he felt the "tenor change among directors; the emphasis shifted to how can we negotiate the best contract."

Dautoff believes the limited resources of directors and staff will be consumed in dealing with the Bureau of Reclamation and no more time will be spent looking at alternatives to importing water.

Dautoff puts a lot of stock in alternatives and thinks water management can be done without importing.

"If we turn down this option, it's not true that we won't have water," Dautoff said. "We have a list of 19 alternative sources we haven't even looked at. There is surface water, reclaimed water and a deep aquifer we haven't even analyzed."

But as the discussions circle around the question of whether to import, rarely does the talk address the heart of the matter: Does agriculture need the water to survive?

It is agriculture that the water management agency is charged by law to protect. Building the conveyance system and buying water from the San Felipe Project may add up to an expensive water bill for farmers. So in the end, the actions taken in the name of the farmer could actually hold the seeds of his destruction by pricing the water out of his reach.

The meeting will be held at 7 p.m. tomorrow in the City Council chambers at City Hall.