

Water officials unite in drought response

Water Supply - 2000
State warns Lompico supply is nearly dry, residents asked to conserve

By JASON HOPPIN

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SANTA CRUZ — With one local water district on the cusp of going dry and most considering steep cutbacks in water use, county water officials Tuesday joined in a show of unity as Santa Cruz County addresses a statewide drought that threatens everything from endan-

gered species to local farming.

"Realistically, this is a shared issue that all of our districts are facing, not just in this county but in the region and state," Board of Supervisors Chair Zach Friend said, stressing the impacts of the drought would be significant. "We all are in this problem, and all, therefore, in the solution together."

County elected officials, city offi-

cials and local water district representatives joined for a press conference on the steps of the county courthouse. Many districts have passed or are considering voluntary 20 percent cutbacks in water use, following a call by Gov. Jerry Brown.

But the event also came as the

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Water officials from throughout Santa Cruz County join county supervisors Tuesday to declare a local drought and request conservation measures from residents.

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DROUGHT

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state Department of Public Health announced the Lompico Water District is one of 17 statewide facing a severe shortage in as soon as 60 days.

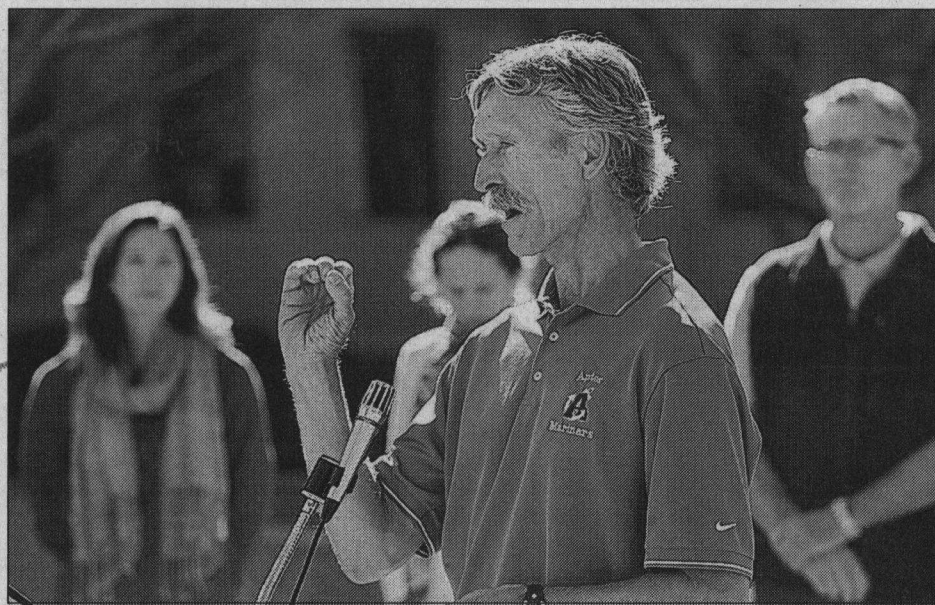
"We have been unable to take water out of the creek since August and well production is down, and we didn't have that much water to begin with," said Lompico board member Lois Henry, who was not at the press conference.

The district has had longstanding water supply issues and is exploring a possible merger with the San Lorenzo Valley Water District, but so far has been stymied by nearly \$3 million in needed upgrades — a hefty bill for the district's 500 customers.

Henry said she was notified the district was on the state list Tuesday, and hopes it comes with funding to help the agencies find more reliable water. The crisis affects property values and the district could have to begin trucking in water, she said, with the district recently approving a steep 30 percent voluntary cut.

"I'm frankly worried," Henry said. "I know people turn their faucet on and say, 'Oh, everything's fine.' And I know it's not."

Friend called for an end to local politicization of water, which has often served as a proxy for battles over growth and land use. The Santa



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Tom LaHue, a board member of the groundwater-dependent Soquel Creek Water District, makes a 'zero' hand gesture signaling the amount of rain water his district has gotten this year to recharge their water system.

Cruz City Council recently tabled a proposed desalination plant, even though the district's primary supply, the San Lorenzo River, is at record-low levels for this time of year.

"We (need) very honest discussions, without the politics, about what we're going to do moving forward throughout this county because realistically we've allowed water to become too politicized and it's just a requirement," Friend said. "Water is a necessity of life, for everything we do."

Tom LaHue, a board member of the groundwater-dependent Soquel Creek Water District, said it would take two decades of customers cutting their use 35

percent to get overdrafted aquifers back to normal and stop seawater intrusion. When Santa Cruz shelved desal, the district — which had been a partner — held meetings to find a new water source and a solution.

"We're going to continue to have them, on finding a supplemental water supply, so that we can get that situation taken care of," LaHue said.

The county's water systems are essentially self-contained, disconnected from the larger state water network and the battles that go with it. That has forced residents to become among the most efficient water conservers in California, but it likely makes it more difficult to reach the 20 cutbacks

local officials are calling for.

The last long-term water cutbacks occurred in the 1970s, before low-flow showerheads and drought-tolerant landscaping became part of the county's lexicon. That could spell trouble if — as some predict — the drought lasts for years.

County Water Resources Director John Ricker said further conservation efforts aren't the answer.

"That's not going to be enough to take care of all of our problems," Ricker said. "We need to do supplemental supply, either through recharge enhancement, recycled water, desalination, water transfer or most likely a combination of all of those sorts of those things."

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