

Manager's Column

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The Drought Measuring Stick Shows More Conservation Ahead

The mission of the Nipomo Community Services District is to provide its customers with reliable, quality, and cost-effective services now and in the future.

For the communities on the Nipomo Mesa the primary source of water comes from the Santa Maria groundwater basin. As the health of the groundwater basin declines, so does the vitality and economic health of the communities who rely on it.

A healthy groundwater basin provides a more predictable and affordable life. Parks and landscaped areas, when watered and cared for properly, thrive in the Mesa's temperate climate making the area green and inviting. Individuals can wash their cars and water their fruit trees openly without fear of being stigmatized by neighbors as water-hogs. Homes, stores, medical facilities as well as recreation areas all contribute to the vitality of a community and all rely on a sufficient, sustainable water supply.

Drought conditions jeopardize our way of life and force all communities to focus resources on something once taken for granted - water. While some communities in California are celebrating the end of the drought, communities on the Mesa must continue their water conservation efforts. That is because of the Mesa's reliance on local groundwater, not snowpack from the Sierras or rivers and lakes. Locally, the memorable winter rains of 2017 help parched landscapes regain their greenery, but did little to measurably recharge our groundwater basin.

The drought is driving up the cost of water for communities on the Mesa. Native groundwater is the least expensive water for most water agencies to access. The cost to import water usually comes in second and the cost to create clean, healthy drinking water from the ocean is generally the most expensive. As area drought conditions drag on, more import water will be needed because pumping native groundwater is restricted in order to protect the groundwater basin from seawater intrusion. The Nipomo Community Services District imported over 800 acre feet of water. That is only enough water to supply about 2,500 homes with their annual water supply needs.

The Nipomo Mesa Management Area Technical Group (NMMA) was created by the Courts to oversee management of one of three sections of the Santa Maria groundwater basin as a result of litigation started in the 1990s. All three technical groups charged with managing their areas are responsible for providing the Court with an annual report that states the condition of the Santa Maria groundwater basin. NMMA measures how the basin responds to groundwater pumping by gathering and observing well levels. Based on an annual measurement of several specific wells that make up the Key Wells Index (KWI), water users adjust their groundwater pumping as required by NMMA.

NMMA has gathered the well data measurements needed to calculate the KWI and the preliminary results are not favorable. Scientists within the NMMA are busy verifying the preliminary results and will be providing the community with KWI data within the month. If verified at its current level, we have another year of focused water conservation ahead of us. It's not all doom and gloom, but more effort will be needed from Mesa communities to exercise vigilance when it comes to using and protecting our shared water supply. The Nipomo Mesa communities are still feeling the effects of a long dry spell and water conservation is still as important as ever.

Until next time...

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