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Water Becoming Greater Concern on Central Coast

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By Keith Carls - email

SANTA MARIA - Turning on the tap in the kitchen, flushing the toilet or watering the lawn.

They are sights and sounds most of us take for granted in our daily lives.

There's growing concern in northern San Luis Obispo County the taps may actually run dry.

Water levels in the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin are falling fast.

Wells are drying up, threatening everything from agriculture and ranching to commercial and residential development.

"Our situation is significantly different than Paso Robles, could it ever happen here, yes it could happen here", says Rick Sweet, Director of Santa Maria's Utilities Department which oversees the municipal water supply and the Santa Maria Valley Groundwater Basin.

"We closely monitor our basin, our basin would not drop 60, 70 feet without us being completely aware of it", Sweet says, "we also have restoration through the Twitchell Reservoir Project of our groundwater basin which is substantial, we import state water for domestic supply."

Northern San Luis Obispo County cities and towns chose not to be a part of the State Water Project when it was built decades ago.

But even imported water can also run dry.

"Next year they are talking about entering the year at a 20 percent (of capacity for the year), Sweet says of State Water Project estimated allocations, "which would be a very, very low number, one of the lowest opening numbers ever."

"We are at a crossroads in California to see what this winter is going to do as far as water supply", Sweet says about the coming year, "now if we have a great water supply year, then we will all think this was talk that was unneeded. but if we don't its certainly going to be a very crucial issue in California."

Water districts across the Central Coast stress the importance of conserving water wherever you are, at home, work or school.

Not only will it save money, but there's no guarantee in the near future that water will be there when you need it.

Strategic priorities for San Luis Obispo County

August 12, 2013

* pulled from Cal Coast News website 8/13/13
MSJEBrun



Debbie Arnold

OPINION By SUPERVISOR DEBBIE ARNOLD

1) Dry Wells

Our top priority must be assisting those residents with dry wells.

- a) If wells weren't dry, the decline of the basin would be a problem, not a crisis.
- b) Urgency is required because wells are going dry, and therefore urgency actions should focus first and foremost on dealing with the dry wells.
- c) Each year this county has purchased the right to approximately 25,000 acre-feet of state water. However, we only take roughly 8,500 acre-feet and sell the balance of water that our residents have paid for. Rather than that water coming into our county, the profits from the sale of that water goes into a reserve account held here at the county by the Flood Control District (estimated \$4.5 million).

DIRECTION TO STAFF

Prepare a staff report detailing options for how the Flood Control District's reserve fund could be used to assist those residents whose wells have gone dry. Include a discussion of options for both financial assistance as well as supplemental water, such as, but not limited to:

How could the county Flood Control District provide low interest loans to affected residents?

How could the county Flood Control District use this reserve to help fund inspections of wells in order to advise residents regarding options (e.g. a failed pump vs. the need for a new well)?

How could the county Flood Control District use this reserve to help secure immediate supplemental water for the hardest hit regions of the basin (e.g. including targeted recharge)?

How could the county Flood Control District use this reserve to help fund the infrastructure necessary to procure supplemental water?

2) Stop Waste

Waste is occurring today, and is something we can stop immediately.

- a) Other counties have focused on eliminating waste because it is simple, has immediate impact, and does not produce unintended consequences.
- b) Conservation strategies that engage all basin users equally increase the county's ability to raise the public's awareness about the water issue and make all basin users part of the solution.

DIRECTION TO STAFF

1. Identify additional urgency ordinance language targeting water waste and conservation strategies.

- a. Look at Los Angeles County's urgency conservation ordinance as an example.

3) Manage Demand

Urgency restrictions should be targeted and careful to avoid unintended consequences.

- a) Our economy is just beginning to slowly recover.
- b) We must exercise extreme care and caution to avoid actions that cost people across this county their property values, jobs or small businesses.

(1) Our actions should make the situation in the North County better – not make a bad situation worse by adopting ordinances that fail to impact the problem, but then do damage to people's property values and the local economy.

- c) The current staff report is a list of ordinances, but does not provide any data quantifying the benefits or impacts of any of the itemized options.

(1) Without specific data, our Board is left to simply close our eyes, reach into the bag and arbitrarily draw out a restrictive ordinance.

(2) We have a public duty to take informed action, not arbitrary action.

d) Let me be clear – nothing in this staff report is inherently unsupportable. If the situation and data supported any of these options as best for the overall needs of our community, I could support any of these items.

i) But right now, I don't have enough information to analyze, evaluate or compare any of these options. It is just a list.

DIRECTION TO STAFF

Update the staff report to include

1) For each of the urgency land use ordinances listed, identify the number of properties and projects that would currently meet the criteria identified in the staff report. For example:

How many projects are currently in the 'pipeline' using the various criteria identified in the staff report?

How many properties subject to each of the various proposals currently have financial or other contractual obligations that would be affected by any of the proposed ordinances?

What are the legal implications of adopting an ordinance that adversely impacts an existing contract?

2) How much water would be saved by adopting each of the proposed ordinances?

Provide the supporting data that would allow the board to identify high-impact regions.

3) The economic impact of each of the proposed ordinances, including

Impacts to the land owners directly subject to each of the proposed ordinances

Impacts to industries related to and dependent upon the properties targeted for restricts (e.g. restaurants, hotels, tourist serving small businesses, agricultural manufacturing, labor, etc)

4) Public Process

The staff report raises the issue of public process and the significant interest amongst stakeholders to be involved in these decisions.

a) When we are talking about people's ability to access water on their property, their investments, their property values, their jobs and livelihoods, we must make time to listen and make sure we understand the full impacts of the decisions that we are making.

b) But this doesn't need to be a new process that requires additional time.

c) The Blue Ribbon Committee created by this board has that diverse stakeholder representation.

REQUEST OF BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE

I would like to request that the Blue Ribbon Committee prepare a response to the various urgency ordinances identified in this staff report.

Include a discussion of the various points of view represented on the committee, or the Solutions Sub-committee.

Does the Committee or Solutions Sub-committee recommend any of these urgency ordinances, and if so, which do they believe will provide the greatest benefit?

received via email 8/9/13 m JeBmu F-

Stakeholders:

You are being contacted because your group corresponded or testified at the August 6, 2013 County of San Luis Obispo Board of Supervisors meeting. At this meeting the Board directed staff to schedule a public hearing on August 27, 2013 to consider an Urgency Ordinance for the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin.

Staff was directed to provide two ordinances:

1. One that would apply to all properties within the unincorporated areas of the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin except those properties within the Atascadero Sub-Basin.
2. One that would apply to all properties within the unincorporated areas of the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin generally within portions of the Estrella, Shandon and Creston Sub-Areas (the area shown as having the greatest change in groundwater elevation).

The Board directed that the ordinances contain the following provisions:

1. The ordinances will establish a moratorium on new or expanded irrigated crop production, conversion of dry farm or grazing land to new or expanded irrigated crop production and new development dependent upon a well in the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin unless such uses offset their total projected water use by a ratio of 2 to 1
2. The ordinances will include certain exemptions (for example to drill a replacement well)
3. The ordinances will require the installation of a meter on new wells
4. The ordinances will establish a moratorium on approval of new ponds, reservoirs and dams other than those allowed by Section 22.52.070.C.2.b of Title 22 of the County Code

In order to meet agenda deadlines for the August 27, 2013 Board of Supervisor meeting, a staff report and the proposed ordinances must be complete by August 16, 2013. Although the time is short, we would like to hear any ideas that your group could provide regarding implementation of the above specified direction from the Board of Supervisors. Staff would need any input by noon on Wednesday August 14, 2013 in order to incorporate it into the staff report and proposed ordinances.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this matter.

Kami Griffin, Acting Director



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