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County aims to tap more well water

By Mary Lynne Vellinga -- Bee Staff Writer - (Published January 25, 2003)

Despite concern that excessive groundwater pumping is hurting the Cosumnes River, county water planners have proposed drawing substantially more water from wells over the next 30 years to serve new developments in eastern Sacramento County.

Environmentalists and government regulators have raised concerns about the county's continued reliance on groundwater pumping, and the lack of research on how such pumping could affect the environment, particularly the Cosumnes.

The county has had to rely on groundwater for new developments in the Elk Grove area and in eastern Sacramento County because thus far it has been unable to deliver much river water to those areas.

Last summer, the county Board of Supervisors approved the 22,000-home Sunrise-Douglas project in Rancho Cordova, even though it initially would have to rely on groundwater.

Earlier this month, the board approved the first installment of that groundwater -- enough to serve 3,288 homes in the project's first three subdivisions.

The Environmental Council of Sacramento has filed a lawsuit against the county over its approval of the Sunrise-Douglas project, saying the county didn't adequately evaluate the effect of groundwater pumping.

Because of groundwater contamination from nearby Aerojet, developers of Sunrise-Douglas plan to pipe water from wells five miles away from the project.

"They've got a big (groundwater) overdraft now," said Jim Pachl, a lawyer with Friends of the Swainson's Hawk, another environmental group. "The more they pump, the worse it gets."

Mike Eaton, director of The Nature Conservancy's Cosumnes River Preserve, is concerned not so much about Sunrise-Douglas as he is about the county's cumulative proposal to pump even more groundwater in the coming years. More than \$100 million has been spent by private and public entities -- including Sacramento County -- to protect 60,000 acres of land in the Cosumnes watershed and the nearby Sacramento River Delta, he said.

The Cosumnes "is a world-class river system," Eaton said. "It's the last undammed river flowing out of the Sierra Nevada, and it supports some of the best habitat in the Central Valley."

State and federal regulators also have raised concerns. The county is beginning the environmental review process for a plan to supply water for urban growth in the eastern and southern portions of the county until 2030.

In a Jan. 9 letter, the state Department of Fish and Game said the county should include in its review an analysis of the effects of additional pumping on the Cosumnes, wetlands and marshes.

Historically, the Cosumnes River -- fed in part by groundwater -- flowed most of the time, said Graham Fogg, a professor of hydrogeology at the University of California, Davis. Now it dries up during the summer, and doesn't flow again until fall. Fogg said salmon don't have enough water in the stream to migrate to their spawning grounds some years.

County officials don't disagree that the river's flows have lessened, saying 30 years of monitoring has shown that the aquifer drops by about a foot a year.

"There's no doubt that groundwater levels have decreased and had an impact on the Cosumnes," said Keith DeVore, county water resources director.

However, DeVore said, the increased pumping planned by the county won't be enough to make the situation significantly worse. He said most damage was done by extensive pumping for farming, still the largest user of water in southeastern Sacramento County. "There was probably more of an impact between 1900 and 1950," DeVore said.

Eventually, the county promises to bring more Sacramento River water to Sunrise-Douglas and other developments.

The draft master plan for the water basin released last month says the county will obtain river water supplies totaling 87,300 acre-feet a year. It has lined up contracts for about 45,000 acre-feet of that water. (An acre-foot serves one to two homes a year.)

The new supply would be delivered via an intake pipe in the Sacramento River near Freeport. The facility would be a joint venture between Sacramento County and the East Bay Municipal Utility District. DeVore said his department is "shooting for 2010" to have the new intake facility on line.

Even if the county is able to deliver the river water as promised, it nonetheless plans to step up groundwater pumping. In its plan, the county proposes to pump up to 23,000 additional acre-feet of water each year from the central basin, DeVore said.

Eaton said such water pumping would violate the county's general plan.

Adopted in 1994, the general plan describes the groundwater as already overtaxed and says new development should be served by surface water. "The county cannot continue to approve development in the south area while ground water is the only source of water," the plan states.

But DeVore called the general plan "virtually obsolete" and said it relied on old numbers for the amount of water that could be safely pumped.

Water users and purveyors now pump about 250,000 acre-feet of water from the central basin each year, DeVore said. The county proposes to increase pumping to an average of no more than 273,000 acre-feet a year -- a yield that the Water Forum identified as sustainable.

But some environmentalists, including Eaton, question the validity of the Water Forum's conclusion. The Water Forum was a landmark water-sharing agreement crafted by water agencies, environmental groups, builders and business leaders with the goal of satisfying the region's thirst while protecting flows in the American River.

"Those (numbers) were established without consideration to rivers, and wetlands and the environment," Eaton said. "They asked only if the water could be withdrawn without damaging the geologic structure that supports it."

About the Writer

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