

Scotts Valley considering water rate hike
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By Genevieve Bookwalter

Water officials are looking to raise rates next month, but they already have raised the ire of some commercial customers who say they would unfairly take the brunt of the hike while residential customers get off with little to no rate increase.

"The more water you use, the higher you pay for that water use, the whole point of which is to encourage water users to conserve," said Charles McNiesh, general manager of Scotts Valley Water District.

But that argument is not resonating with commercial customers, who might already have low-flow toilets and drought tolerant plants but still fall into high water rate categories due to the volume of people using a business, said Dennis McFarlane with Idevco, a Cupertino company that owns and manages seven commercial properties in Scotts Valley.

"We can't control how many times employees flush the toilet," McFarlane said.

His tenants include Calvary Church on Green Hills Road, Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc. on El Pueblo Road and Foothill Securities Inc. on Mount Hermon Road, among others.

At issue is three-year water rate increases proposed by the Scotts Valley Water District to encourage customer conservation and cover increased operation costs due to inflation, McNiesh said. The total amount collected by the district would increase about 2 percent, McNiesh said, but customers could see their bills go up more or less than that based on the amount of water used. The district serves 3,500 customers.

For example, the average Scotts Valley residential customer uses just over 16,000 gallons in every two-month billing period. If residential customers instead use 14,000 gallons or less, their rates will not change, McNiesh said.

However, for customers using more than 50,000 gallons every two months, those rates could jump nearly 20 percent for every 1,000 gallons over 50,000 gallons used, from \$9.66 to \$12.03, according to district figures.

The Santa Cruz Water Department, the county's largest water district which serves 90,000 customers from the North Coast to Capitola, already has approved residential rates similar to, if not more than, what Scotts Valley is considering. But Santa Cruz's rates for commercial customers are dramatically less than those proposed in Scotts Valley, said Santa Cruz Water Department head Bill Kocher.

All of Santa Cruz's commercial customers are provided water service at cost, Kocher said, because demand swings wildly between a small insurance office and a computer

chip manufacturer. But in return, all businesses must meet strict conservation rules set by the city, Kocher said.

For example, Joie de Vivre, the San Francisco company that bought and renovated the Dream Inn over Cowell Beach in 2008, was required to replace all hotel toilets with "ultra-low-flow" models, Kocher said.

In Scotts Valley, water directors are considering a discounted flat rate for commercial customers who show they have taken all steps necessary to conserve as much water as possible, McNiesh said. Details of who would qualify for that have not been worked out, but the proposed discount would be tied to the rate for those using 24,001 to 36,000 gallons. McNiesh said Scotts Valley cannot afford to give business customers water at cost without significantly raising residential rates.

City leaders said they have questions about the proposed rate increases, too.

"I was surprised because I'd been hearing about the community's success" with water conservation, said Councilwoman Donna Lind. "We do really well, and then rates still go up."#

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Heavy rain a big help, but still not a drought-buster
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By Shanna McCord

The whitewater now rushing over the lip of the Loch Lomond Reservoir is a strong sign the region's water supply is nursing its way back to health after three years of below-normal rainfall.

The recent winter storms that drenched the Central Coast quickly boosted rainfall totals to near normal levels for the season, with a total of 15 inches in Santa Cruz and 31 inches at the reservoir since October, Santa Cruz Water Department officials said.

However, the eight straight days of rain -- with the San Lorenzo River surging and the Loch Lomond Reservoir spilling over -- don't make an entire year's supply of water. Water officials say wet weather needs to linger well into spring before Santa Cruz has a fully replenished water supply to survive summer without mandatory restrictions.

In a normal year, Santa Cruz gets about 30 inches of rain.

"It feels wet to you and me, but we're talking about water that needs to last from April to October," said Toby Goddard, conservation manager for the Santa Cruz Water Department, the area's largest water supplier with 90,000 customers from Davenport to Capitola. "Before the recent storms, we were lagging behind a little bit. At least now we're caught up to what would be normal for this time of year."

Goddard released a report Tuesday that gives an overview of the city's water conditions with a focus on whether supply is expected to match demand. Updates on the water supply will come in reports in February and March.

The Santa Cruz supply relies on surface water provided largely by the San Lorenzo River and North Coast creeks. The Loch Lomond Reservoir serves as the city's emergency backup water supply.

Tuesday's report, which will be presented to the city Water Commission at its meeting Monday, indicates the Santa Cruz water supply is better off this year than last year, which was classified as "critically dry." Mandatory water restrictions were put in place that limited the days and times customers could water lawns and gardens.

Santa Cruz water officials have yet to decide whether water restrictions will be imposed this summer.

"We're certainly in a better position than we were just one year ago," Goddard said. "It is a good start and it helps."

The health of the city's water supply is largely based on discharge from the San Lorenzo River. So far this season, discharge from the river is only a third of the long-term average annual volume, Goddard said.

A sudden halt or reduction in rainfall this winter could throw the city's water supply in a precarious state.

"It is nice to get some rain. It's nice to see what Mother Nature can throw at us," Goddard said. "Still, it takes a lot more rain stretched out over a period of months, not days, to recharge the watershed."

Laura Brown, general manager of the Soquel Creek Water District, said the recent series of storms has not immediately improved the district's groundwater supply.

Recharging the district's supply, which comes from underground aquifers, will take time as rain percolates in the hills and eventually makes its way to the district's wells, she said.

"The rainfall is encouraging," Brown said. "We're glad to see it coming, and hope it continues. The longer the rainy season, the less need there is to irrigate and it increases recharge for the future."

Showers are expected to taper off today with clear skies in store on Thursday as the storm system moves south. Friday could see a slight chance of light rain, according to forecasters with the National Weather Service in Monterey.

Santa Cruz County should stay dry through the weekend.

The next storm is due Monday, though it looks "pretty weak" compared with the past two weeks, meteorologist Carolina Walbrun said.

"Santa Cruz could see a quarter-inch at the most," Walbrun said of Monday's storm.#