

Fresno County supervisors get a first look at severe water restrictions

By Marc Benjamin

- Fresno County supervisors get a first look at water restrictions.
- Three of the county service areas are the subjects of a federal lawsuit.
- The county may look at a plan to limit water-intensive crops near small communities.

Water restrictions could soon be coming to about 400 water customers in communities that are provided water by Fresno County.

The most severe restrictions will be in three western Fresno County areas: El Porvenir, Cantua Creek and the O'Neills Farming Community. Fresno County supervisors got their first chance to discuss the restrictions Tuesday. The board could approve the restrictions on March 24.

The three communities will go to stage four restrictions. Outdoor watering and building permits are prohibited. Two weeks ago, Cantua Creek residents voted to end their water service because raw water rates would hike their bills over \$100 per month. El Porvenir residents, three miles to the west of Cantua Creek, pay about \$110 per month for water.

The other communities affected are Shaver Springs Waterworks District and the Beran Way subdivision in southwest Fresno.

"We will monitor and ensure the residents out there do comply," said Alan Weaver, Fresno County's public works and planning director. "It means that they will try to cut back on their water usage by not watering outside and doing things that are prohibited."

Cantua Creek, O'Neills Farming Community and Shaver Springs are all named in a federal lawsuit filed by California River Watch against Fresno County under the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act. The suit claims the county failed to conduct sampling in a timely manner and allowed water systems to remain contaminated. Cantua Creek and O'Neills contain excessive contaminant levels for disinfectants used to cleanse raw water. Shaver Springs was over the maximum allowed for "gross alpha emitters," naturally occurring radiation from radon gas originating from rock formations. Supervisors have discussed the lawsuit in closed session.

Last year, Madera County settled its case with California River Watch by paying the agency \$30,000 but denied "all liability and wrongdoing." The case involved similar water issues in maintenance districts serving residents in Lakeshore near Bass Lake, Teaford Meadows near North Fork, and Still Meadow in the Oakhurst area.

Stage three restrictions will go into effect for the Shaver Springs area, a community southwest of Shaver Lake with 70 customers that rely on water coming out of fractured rock, which has not been fed by winter precipitation, Weaver said. Of all the communities served by Fresno County, Shaver Springs is the one most likely to run out of water, he said, because of the lack of precipitation.

Weaver said Shaver Springs residents "self-regulate themselves very well."

Residents could be fined if they use water for prohibited purposes, such as watering lawns or washing vehicles, but

finer are not the county's intention, he said.

"We are generally water educators, but there is the provision within the ordinance that if we can't educate and they continue to offend, we do have enforcement capability through fines," he said.

The Beran Way area gets water from the city of Fresno, which has stage two water restrictions in place, limiting outdoor watering to twice a week. Weaver said the county will follow the city's rules since the city provides the water.

Residents in the affected areas will be sent notices after the restrictions are approved, Weaver said.

In the smaller rural communities some residents may grow their own food, which concerns Ashley Werner, a lawyer for the Counsel for Leadership and Accountability.

She suggested a modification of the county's water restrictions ordinance should let low-income residents grow their own food. She also asked that supervisors consider lower penalties for violators in low-income communities.

Earlier in the day, supervisors Brian Pacheco and Buddy Mendes were named to lead a countywide group that will direct the county's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act committee. Leaders of water agencies, citizens and social and environmental justice advocates asked to have a role in creating local policies when the committee starts its work next year.

Supervisor Henry R. Perea said he wants the board to include a member of the environmental justice community in addition to other experts.

Werner suggested that the committee include a representative of her organization, which wants the committee to be diverse and to protect supplies for small communities, especially those relying on shallow wells. While ensuring that disadvantaged communities are not negatively affected by groundwater management efforts.

Bob Mitchell, a southwest Fresno resident, said five wells in his neighborhood have gone dry since two almond orchards moved in nearby and started pumping ground water. The new trees, he said, will not produce fruit for three years, yet residents are already suffering the consequences. He said it will cost his neighbors \$15,000 or more to drill new wells.

"We are going dry based on the volume of pumping it takes to bring an almond tree into production three years hence," he said.

Nothing stops the farmers from pumping, while residents are conserving water.

A third farmer, he said, is taking out a less water-intensive and productive grape vineyard and replacing it with almonds because they are more lucrative.

"Look at the possibility that we may need to have a moratorium on new planting of crops that are water-intensive, which an almond orchard is," he said.

During the afternoon's water restrictions discussion, Perea said the board should discuss new water-intensive plantings, such as almonds, and the effects ground water pumping has on surrounding residential areas.

Large corporations are buying up farmland and planting the most lucrative crops that require the most water, he said.

"What responsibility do we have?" he asked. "We can't let their water systems go dry ... this is a policy issue that I think we should at least vet."

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