

## PVWMA plans meeting Friday on proposed 6.6 percent rate hikes

By Samantha Clark , Santa Cruz Sentinel

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### Informational Meeting

- The Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency will answer questions about its proposed new rates, which would help provide funding for projects addressing groundwater overdraft and seawater intrusion.
- The meeting will be held at 7:30 a.m. at the agency's office, 36 Brennan St. in Watsonville.

WATSONVILLE >> The Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency is hosting an informational breakfast meeting Friday to answer questions on a rate increase proposal.

The meeting begins at 7:30 a.m. at the agency's office located at 36 Brennan St. in Watsonville.

Coastal farmers would bear a greater share of the cost for solving Pajaro Valley groundwater problems under the new plan.

"It's going to be expensive to pay for a solution, but it will allow agriculture to continue in this valley, which is the goal for all of us," said Mary Bannister, general manager for the water agency.

Officials said the rate increases will cover rising operating costs and future revenue reductions due to water conservation. The agency saw a 40 percent drop in water consumption this first quarter of the year compared to last, from 8,650 to 5,385 acre feet.

As the perpetual problem of groundwater shortage continues to darken, the agency wants to fund projects working to solve it. Looming overhead, first-ever state groundwater regulations signed last November require that basins are brought into balance by 2040. The basin needs an average of 12,100 acre-feet of water returning back into it each year to balance the deficit, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Bannister said that the new rates will bump annual revenue from \$11 million to \$16 million over six years. That money will go toward projects addressing groundwater overdraft and seawater intrusion. Pumping in excess of seasonal recharge throughout the basin has depleted groundwater levels and led to the contamination of wells in the coastal zone reaching 3 miles inland.

"These efforts will mean the basin is 95 percent sustainable by 2025," said Kirk Schmidt, co-chair of the committee that spend the last year developing the proposal. "That will put PVWMA 15 years ahead of where it has to be to comply with the law. If the basin is sustainable we'll be relieved from some of the pressures of the drought because then we'll be in good shape."

Though the numbers may still change, the plan now raises the augmentation charge, a fee on groundwater pumping. Inland farmers would see a 6.6 percent hike annually for the next five years, from \$179 per acre foot to \$246 per acre foot in fiscal year 2019-20.

"It's a really small hike compared to what other water agencies are implementing like Santa Cruz," Schmidt said. The city of Santa Cruz approved a total hike of more than 60 percent through 2019.

“In all businesses, people complain when their rates go up,” he said, “but there hasn’t been a lot of outcry for this plan.”

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Coastal farmers would see higher increases because of the higher cost of providing services in that area and to encourage them to access the network of pipes that deliver recycled irrigation water — an option inland farmers don’t have.

“Reducing pumping at the coast reduces the amount of saltwater intrusion,” Bannister said. “It gives us the biggest bang for our buck.”

Their augmentation charge would rise 9.5 percent a year, from \$215 an acre foot to \$338 in 2019-20. Their delivered water charge would see an annual increase of 3 percent for the next five years, from \$348 an acre foot to \$392.

An acre foot of water is roughly 326,000 gallons — enough to fill a football field with a foot deep of water and enough to supply a half-acre of strawberries.

The public hearing for the rate changes is set for May 20. They would go into effect on July 1.

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