

# THE PORTERVILLE RECORDER

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## County moves toward well ordinance

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By: The Porterville Recorder staff

### **Plan aimed to reduce groundwater overdraft**

Tulare County Supervisors Tuesday directed staff to come up with a draft ordinance which would place a moratorium on the drilling of new ag wells on land currently not in production.

Supervisors held a lengthy debate on coming up with a plan to regulate the drilling of new water wells in the county, but not all supervisors agreed an ordinance is necessary.

What was directed to staff was to look at an ordinance which would prohibit the drilling of wells on ag land that does not already have a well. It would not ban replacement wells and may not ban additional wells on ag land where there are already wells.

"I think we are looking for a problem that does not exist in Tulare County," said Supervisor Steven Worthley.

However, several of those who addressed the board urged it to come up with an emergency groundwater ordinance in the interim until the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) goes into effect in 2020. Many of those who spoke want a moratorium on most well drilling, but not all.

Kristin Dobbin with the Community Water Center has been pushing for several months for the board to act.

"We have gone round and round on this. Now is the time to take action," she told the board members.

She pointed out the number of failed wells in the county over the past two years and said the county continues to overdraft its groundwater supply. She urged the board to come up with a draft ordinance which can be debated.

She was pleased with the direction given by the board.

"It definitely was encouraging. I am pleased to see the supervisors are taking it serious," she said following the meeting.

Tulare County has been at the epicenter of the drought with more than 1,600 domestic water wells failing, the majority of those in the unincorporated area of East Porterville. Farmers have had to deepen or drill new wells as they saw their ag wells go dry as well.

Supervisor Allen Ishida said those replacement wells do not mean more water is being pumped from the ground.

"The main misconception is farmers are only using the same amount of water on crops as before," he noted.

Worthley agreed, saying he did not want an ordinance which would stop all drilling.

Fifth District Supervisor Mike Ennis said something needs to be done to stop new drilling.

"We shouldn't be out there trying to develop new farmland when you can't take care of what we've got," he said.

Several of those who spoke urged action now.

"If we don't do something to protect that water now, it's going to hurt our county, our economy," said Paul Boyer with Self-Help Enterprises which has been involved in getting water to residents whose wells have gone dry.

Jose Alvarado said, "When we look at this issue we should think about school children and lack of water."

Supervisors said farmers must have water to survive.

"If we cut the water off to farmers, people in the cities will lose their jobs," said Supervisor Phil Cox.

Ishida said what is most needed is a return to the supply of water from Millerton Lake.

"Our communities will not survive without surface water," he said, adding that is why the proposed new reservoir at Temperance Flat above Millerton Lake is important.

Fourth generation farmer Larry Peltzer agreed. "We're all in this community. We're not the enemy," he said.

Tulare County Farm Bureau Executive Director Patricia Stever-Blattler said their position is it is premature to act with SGMA looming.

"Our concern is SGMA is breathing down our neck and there is sufficient activity to address this," she said on Thursday. She also said there are property rights involved as to what an owner can do, including drilling a well.

However, she said "There's a happy medium the county needs to find."

Any ordinance will only be in effect until the SGMA begins. That state law will put limits on how much anyone — farmers, residents and cities — can pump from the underground and right now the limit being talked about is just a half of an acre foot of water per acre a year. Officials have noted that will not allow for farming and most homeowners use about a third more of that amount now.

Supervisors also asked staff to evaluate if a hydrologist is needed to assess well drilling in the county.

"I'm optimistic," said Dobbin. "I'm glad to see they are doing something," she added.