

Water officials meet to talk about local plans, aquifer regulations

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After the meeting, Bossert said he would add clarifications to the written proposal, partially to explain how the groundwater district will track of the water being allocated between users, and how these new allocations will be shared between water users in the Sheridan 6.

Bossert said the restrictions are meant to go into effect at the start of 2013 and remain for five years, until the end of 2017. A committee consisting of a district board member, a Division of Water Resources member and water users would be formed to oversee the agreement. Before the it expires, the committee will decide whether and for how long to continue the regulations.

A law passed in the 2012 Legislature allowed the state to create Local Enhanced Management Areas. However, Bossert said the groundwater district has been considering tighter water restrictions for over a decade, and met with members from November 2008 to May of this year

on the issue.

The restrictions are designed to keep the water right-holders in the Sheridan 6 from pumping more than 114,000 acre feet of water out of the ground in the next five years.

"The allocation of 114,000 acre feet is pretty much sacrosanct," Bossert said, adding that future changes to the management area should be made in deference to this number.

They will mainly apply to farmers, keeping them from pumping more than 55 acre inches over the next five years, with no restrictions on how much of that allocation they can pump in any given year. The original yearly water-right restrictions on each well will still apply also.

"The annual rate of pumping is related to seasonal rainfall and therefore it's variable from year to year," Bossert said. "We've got to allow people to use that water flexibly."

He told Barfield that in earlier meetings, farmers said an average of

11 inches would sufficient to irrigate their crops, if properly managed.

Users of stock water for cattle will be limited to using 12 gallons of water a day per head, Bossert told Barfield, down from 15 gallons. There is a single recreational pond which will be limited to using 90 percent of its old allocation.

After the order goes into effect, he said, farmers can pool their water rights or combine them with any other water rights in Sheridan 6. The groundwater district will keep spread sheets of each right to keep track of pooling and transfers of water rights between different users, making sure everyone stays within their boundaries.

"It's going to track this like a bank account," Bossert told Barfield, "and then again it's going to stay under the 114,000-acre-foot bottom line."

Water right users will be fined \$1,000 for every day they pump less than four acre feet over their five year limit, and will lose their water rights for two years if they pump

four acre feet or more over that limit. Four observation wells in the area track groundwater levels, he said, and a fifth will be ready soon.

Not everyone was sure the water-right holders would be kept at the proper limit.

"Water rights get pretty complicated," Barfield noted.

At the end of the meeting, he asked Bossert to clarify how allocations of water could be transferred between users.

Harold Murphy, a farmer who owns only one well in Sheridan 6, said he was worried about how farmers will be able to pool together their water allocations, allowing them to pump more on some wells. Although farmers in the district can pool the place of use between water rights by piping water to different fields, they cannot pump more than their yearly allocation on any given well. Under the proposal, the new allocations could be pooled together among any water right holders in the Sheridan 6.

"In the long run, in the bottom of

the column, more water is used," he said.

Murphy said he thinks he will only grow 60 to 70 percent of his old crop under the new restrictions. His well has been pumping less and less water each year. While it once was able to pump about 600 gallons a minute, he said, it's now pumping closer to 450 gallons. This means, he said, that he is in favor of the restrictions on water use, but does not like

the way they were written.

"I want it to go through," he said, "but I want it to be fair and equal treatment between water users."

The Sheridan 6 area covers 125 water right holders. Ray Luhman, assistant manager for the district, said that about five of them own as many as 12 water rights. The land is mostly in Sheridan County but also includes nine square miles in Thomas County south of Menlo.

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