Mendota: Resident's water complaints hit a state roadblock

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bad-water reputation, especially since the state is considering Mendota as a new prison site.

A new prison would mean jobs and an expanded tax base in a farmworker city of 8,000 where up to 60 percent of the adults are considered "working poor."

In the next several months, the city plans to spend $500,000 to build a new well, rehabilitate two other wells and upgrade the city system, City Manager Alan Bengyel said.

He said the city will also complete a study of the area's groundwater in the next 60 days.

"Our water meets all the health standards right now," Bengyel said. "But we expect people to notice a change in the taste of the water next year."

Petry said he knows Mendota has tried to find new well fields with good water, but has met with little success in the last four years.

The water contains high amounts of total dissolved solids — or minerals and other elements that cannot be filtered. The state standard is fewer than 500 parts per million.

Fresno's water is about 300 parts per million. In summer, Mendota's water often reaches or surpasses 1,000 parts per million.

The state Department of Health Services monitors Mendota's water but can do little else unless the problem is a health hazard. Petry has written to the department as well and is waiting for a reply.

State Health Services engineer Carl Carlucci, based in Fresno, has noted that Mendota's water has degraded over the last decade or more.

No connection has been established yet between the farm groundwater pumping and Mendota's bad-tasting water in summertime. But Petry said such a link makes sense to him.

Petry alleges salty irrigation water seeping into the aquifer raises water levels and moves pollutants into the Mendota area.

Engineering experts have varying opinions on that scenario. But most agree salty irrigation water has been building underground on the west side since the 1930s, when the federal government closed the west-side San Luis Drain system.

The underground system was closed after biologists found dead and deformed wildlife at Kesterson Reservoir, where the drain water was pooling.

For farmers, the closed drain has led to a lawsuit and thousands of farmland acres slowly being poisoned by the rising salty water table. Petry contends the closed drain and continued irrigation have contributed to bad-tasting water for Mendota.

"The problem was caused 50 years ago when they built Friant Dam on the San Joaquin River," Petry said. "Mendota's beneficial use of river groundwater recharge from the river was lost. The state must restore some minimal flows."

Such flows might be restored as the result of a lawsuit filed in 1988 by the Natural Resources Defense Council about the operation of Friant Dam at Millerton Lake.

The lawsuit is on hold in a Sacramento federal court while irrigation contract negotiations continue between some Friant farmers and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

But in December, the U.S. 9th District Court of Appeals in San Francisco will hear arguments on the part of the case about restoring the San Joaquin River flow beyond Friant Dam. No timetable has been set for a decision.

The other roadblock for Petry is the federal-state effort to protect the San Francisco Bay-Delta estuary and provide water for cities, farms and industry. The plan, which amounts to a water distribution scheme for California, may involve Friant Dam, so the state board wants to wait until the plan is fully developed.

But the plan has been in the making for almost two years, and many believe it could continue past its three-year deadline.

Walter Pettit, executive director of the state water board, was not available to comment. A public information official said Petry could appeal the decision.

Mendota water put on hold

■ Resident says distribution planning and lawsuit have put complaints on hold.

By Mark Grossi
The Fresno Bee

Mendota resident Ed Petry grew tired of waiting for local authorities to deal with his town's foul-tap water this summer and complained to the state.

State Water Resources Control Board officials mailed Petry a letter last week saying he'll have to wait for them, too.

The state isn't willing to make a move on Mendota's water problem until the bureaucratic and legal dust settles on a vast state water distribution plan and a long-running federal lawsuit.

Both issues could affect Mendota's problem, state documents indicate. But it may be years before the state plan and the lawsuit are settled.

And Petry is frustrated.

"They mailed me a letter, but they're not giving me a real response," said Petry, a retired building contractor and former City Council member who has a consuming passion for water issues.

"We're being affected by all the farm pumping around here and the lack of San Joaquin River water. The state is responsible for those impacts on us."

Petry's opinion on farm groundwater pumping has been disputed, but no one doubts that Mendota's water tastes bad in summer. The water is not a health hazard by state standards, but it is barely palatable.

Local officials are well-acquainted with the issue. They are fighting the city's

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