

Redwood Valley Cuts Water to Agriculture Users

By JUSTINE FREDERIKSEN – Ukiah Daily Journal

Updated: 04/19/2014 12:00:14 AM PDT

Attempt to divert more water through Potter Valley was unsuccessful

The Redwood Valley County Water District voted Thursday night to stop providing the water its customers use for their crops and animals.

"I am deeply pained by this; this is awful," said Bill Koehler, the district's general manager, describing the vote as "the most painful moment in my entire association with that board."

Currently, the valley's 4,000 to 5,000 residents are limited to 50 gallons a day per person. Come Monday, Koehler said, the district's agricultural meters, which provide unpotable water unfit for human consumption, will be shut off.

"I hate this; we're going to get hit hard," Koehler said, describing the valley's \$60 million wine industry as "gone."

Board member Pam Ricetti abstained from the vote Thursday night because, as a vineyard owner, she would have directly benefited if the resolution to cut off agricultural water users did not pass.

"I have 36 acres of grapes, and if we get four or five days of frost, it'll freeze the vineyards," Ricetti said, explaining that she does have a couple of ponds, but not enough to handle several days of frost.

"We haven't had any so far, so we've been really lucky," she said. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

Ricetti said she was not sure what someone with horses or other animals will do for water.

"They're going to have a tough go," she said. "It's a horrible situation. It's sickening."

With Ricetti abstaining, the resolution passed 3-1 with Jeanette Hallman casting the "no" vote.

In the days leading up to Thursday's meeting, the RVCWD and other agencies tried to obtain more water by diverting more of the flow from the Eel River's Scott Dam through the Potter Valley Project and into Lake Mendocino.

According to the request made to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the RVCWD was hoping to obtain 800 acre feet by "increasing flows in the East Branch Russian River as long as water is available and all Reasonable Prudent Alternative-required minimum flow requirements are met."

The request was made under the "emergency clause" of the RPA, which dictates how much water Pacific Gas & Electric (which owns Lake Pillsbury and Scott Dam) diverts through Potter Valley to Lake Mendocino.

Guinness McFadden, one of the Potter Valley Irrigation District's board members, said multiple agencies discussed the request and all were in verbal agreement: RVCWD, PG&E, the Sonoma County Water Agency, the Friends of the Eel River, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, the National Marine and Fisheries Service and FERC.

With the amount of water that was flowing through Lake Pillsbury, McFadden said it would have taken less than two days to collect the desired 800 acre feet, all while keeping minimum flows in the Eel River, if the request had been approved.

However, McFadden said when FERC requested agreement in writing, all of the agencies provided it except for NMFS, which determined that the situation in Redwood Valley did not qualify as an emergency.

"Although NMFS thought this could be an opportunity to potentially help RVCWD with its water situation due to the drought and small quantity of water requested, we have determined that the request does not qualify as an emergency under the RPA," wrote Dick Butler, supervisor for the Santa Rosa office of NMFS. "In particular, this request does not clearly indicate that this is a sudden, unexpected occurrence that involves a clear and imminent danger that demands immediate actions to prevent or mitigate loss of, or danger to, life, health, property or essential public services.

"If the situation does not improve and an emergency situation arises and is consistent with the above definition, NMFS is amenable to considering an exception," Butler continued. "While the request was for a limited amount of water and for a short duration utilizing water above the NMFS required minimum flows, flows in the Eel River in excess of the minimum required flows do provide benefits to the Eel River, especially to out migrating salmon and steelhead."

"We're in a deep pickle of fish," said Ricetti, predicting that since the RVCWD cannot legally shut off the fire hydrants, people wanting to steal water for their crops, legal or otherwise, may pull up trucks and siphon water from the hydrants.

"If people see that, call the (Mendocino County Sheriff's Office at 463-4411)," she said. "It's a felony to steal that water."

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