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# VALLEY VOICE

THE VOICE OF THE GOLETA VALLEY

## Farmers spared water rate hike

But district imposes  
4% increase on all other  
users effective July 1

By Martha Lannan  
*Voice Community Editor*

In an unexpected move, the Goleta Water District spared farmers and ranchers from a 4 percent rate increase approved for all other customers Wednesday night. The 5-0 vote made the increase effective July 1.

The board of directors had considered raising rates for all customers, and had indicated at its last meeting two weeks ago that it was necessary.

The decision was reached after Kevin Walsh, general manager of the district, told the board that a 1 cent increase in the proposed urban rate, from \$3.70

to \$3.71 per hundred cubic feet (HCF), would make up for income that would have been realized from a 4 percent increase for farmers.

The cost of water for all customers except farmers and ranchers will increase, and a 4 percent increase in service charges — a fixed monthly fee based on the size of the meter — for all customers was also approved. In an effort to help individuals on fixed or very low incomes, an exception to the increase was approved for residential customers using very little water. Customers using less than 4 HCF a month will not be charged the increase. Each HCF equals 748 gallons.

Several farmers implored the board to reconsider the universal increase, arguing that a hike now would mean that agricultural rates would be raised twice, for a total of 9 percent, in one avocado growing season. Ag rates were raised 5 percent in July 2005.

"I'm happy about the action the board took," said Joe Bloodworth, who manages 400 acres of farmland in the Goleta Valley. "They say they're in our corner, but haven't acted like it in the past."

Susan Petrovich, an attorney representing several farmers, told the board that ranchers simply could not absorb two rate increases in one crop year. "Every year they move closer and closer to extinction." She urged the board to leave agricultural rates the same for another year.

This year is one of the worst since the early 1980s for avocado ranchers for a number of reasons, multiple speakers said. Because of the North American Free Trade Agreement, Mexico and Chile have been able to undersell U.S. growers, dramatically dropping the market price

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for avocados.

"If we didn't have Mexico and Chile, we'd be in a much better position," said Bloodworth. "Yes, fruit is dropping — we have fruit on the ground because we'd be operating at a net loss if we harvested fruit under 5 ounces," he said.

Smaller fruit is usually sold for less than the larger avocados, but at a profit in a normal year.

Light applause followed the decision to leave agricultural rates the same for the time being, but frustration with the board and its methods was still evident.

Speakers urged a thorough study, by two outside sources, to determine the actual cost of delivering water to agricultural users. District officials have circulated information that addresses the subject, but for years many customers have requested a more detailed study by outside consultants. At the end of the meeting, Walsh announced that the district was planning to do just that.

The board was again challenged to set a policy dictating several months of notice whenever a rate increase is being considered, citing what they called the woefully inadequate notice of the increase, and also of the change in venue for Wednesday's meeting. The location for the meeting was posted on the district's Web site Friday.

Others were dismayed that there was not more supporting detail available justifying the proposed rate increase.

"I have seen nothing in your numbers to justify a 4 percent increase," said Ann Crosby, who questioned the need for raising rates in light of the district's strong financial year. "Net revenues are 8 percent higher than in the same period last year," she stated. "You have given no facts we can believe in. We need detailed and accurate data that ties it all together."

Other speakers lamented the lack of supporting detail, a history of short notice of meetings, and questioned whether or not the board took the time to ask probing questions of staff once recommendations, including the current raise in rates, are forwarded to the board.