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Though the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria reduced the scale of its project, and as a result slashed the estimated amount of water it would use — from 106 million gallons a year to 36 million — fears persist.

“I’m shaking in my boots,” said Dennis Carrera, a Millbrae Avenue resident who lives about a mile northwest of the casino site, where two wells are to be drilled to 600 feet. That’s deeper than nearly all the 200 wells within a two-mile radius of the casino, according to environmental reports prepared for the project.

In Sacramento last summer, at hearings where legislators reviewed the tribe’s proposed gambling compact with the state, some residents said they feared for their livelihoods.

“If they go dry, we have to leave; we have nowhere to live,” said Selena Polston, who lives on her organic farm about 1½ miles from the fast-rising casino.

Now, Carrera and Polston are among those who have enrolled in a program the federal government required the tribe to set up to monitor well levels within the two-mile radius. Under the program, the tribe will compensate property owners whose wells are affected by the casino, and an adjoining hotel planned for a later date.

“If there are any impacts, this will help the property owner justify any claims,” said Jay Jasperse, chief engineer for the Sonoma County Water Agency.

On Friday, two staff members of the Sotoyome Resource Conservation District, which the tribe has hired to run the testing aspect of the program, used a sonic meter and an electronic tape measure fitted with a sensor to check the water level in Carrera’s well.

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Kevin Cullinen, a Sotoyome project coordinator, told Carrera and another neighbor, Pat Fabbiani, that the program would run for up to three years after the casino starts pumping its well. That is expected to happen near the end of the year when the casino is projected to open its doors.

“I think it's a good thing but I don't think it's going to help us,” said Fabbiani, whose initial well test is next week. She said the hotel is her real concern because it will create the heaviest water demand. The monitoring program should be extended to take into full account its impact on surrounding wells, she said.

“We want five to 10 years of monitoring,” Fabbiani said.

She and Carrera are among more than 70 people to have so far enrolled in the program.

“Generally, the feedback has been very positive,” said Kara Heckert, executive director of the Sotoyome district, a non-regulatory public agency that works with private landowners on water and conservation issues.

“I am very pleased about it,” said Ken Yonts, who lives on Millbrae Avenue resident about a mile from the casino.

“I think if it didn't happen I would probably have to have gone and paid for it,” he said, “because I think it's critical to have a baseline, because later if something goes wrong, what would you do?”

The tribe is paying the Sotoyome district \$126,035 to manage the program.

District employees are to make quarterly site visits to check variations from the baseline established during the first measurement. And property owners keep a log book to record well performance and related issues.

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If wells become unusable within three years of when the Graton Rancheria starts pumping from its casino well, the tribe is to pay property-owners part of the cost of replacing, rehabilitating or deepening their wells, according to the federal requirements.

A civil engineer hired by the tribe will determine whether there has been an impact and its extent.

“That's his job; we're just collecting the data for you guys,” Cullinen told Fabbiani and Carrera.

Carrera is among neighbors uncomfortable with that process, saying they long have been excluded from decisions involving the casino.

“There's been a lot of promises,” he said. “I don't have the confidence that if my well goes dry, that they're going to bail me out.” He called the program a “band-aid.”

But it has assuaged other residents' fears. They say it will make it easier to reach agreement with the tribe for compensation.

“Without it, if someone comes in a year from now, two years from now, and they claim a problem, it's going to be a fight,” said Dietrich Stroeh, who lives on Wilfred Avenue, the north border of the Gratontribe's reservation.

Stroeh, a former general manager of the Marin Municipal Water District, helped design the monitoring program, working with the county water agency, tribal representatives and Sotoyome district officials.

“Most of the wells out there are ... pretty shallow. They could very well be affected,” Stroeh said. “This way, there's at least be some legitimate” data.

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On Bartleson Road, toward the edge of the two-mile radius, Polston and her husband, Steve Schwartz came away encouraged from their first encounter with the program.

“I think it's pretty positive. With the (Sotoyome district), that gives a level of independence in regards to the monitoring role,” said Schwartz.

“I think this lays a foundation for protecting us long-term,” he said.

Others, like Fabbiani, say that if the impacts are severe enough, no compensation will be enough.

“If there's no water, what do you compensate?,” she said. “Even if you move, your property is valueless.”

Information about the program appears to have spread unevenly. Down the street from Carrera, Stephanie Duncan said she was not signed up because she hadn't learned about it and she wasn't sure she would participate.

“I haven't gotten anything in the mail from the tribe, nothing,” she said. “It depends on who's paying for it. I can't; I'm on a fixed income.”

The program is free of charge. Data about water use is not collected by the district or the tribe, but is retained by property owners, Heckert said.

“We're providing a technical education and outreach service is how we see it,” she said.

Separately, the tribe is going to pay the county \$1.5 million toward a project to analyze and conserve groundwater use. It will also, starting at about the fourth year after the casino opens,

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make annual payments of \$275,000 to operate that program. Those payments were negotiated by the county with the tribe in an agreement to offset casino impacts.

The federal government also required the tribe to start a separate program to monitor groundwater levels and quality at 12 wells, conducting monthly testing for at least four years.

Representatives of the Graton Rancheria did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

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