

HIGH PROFILE

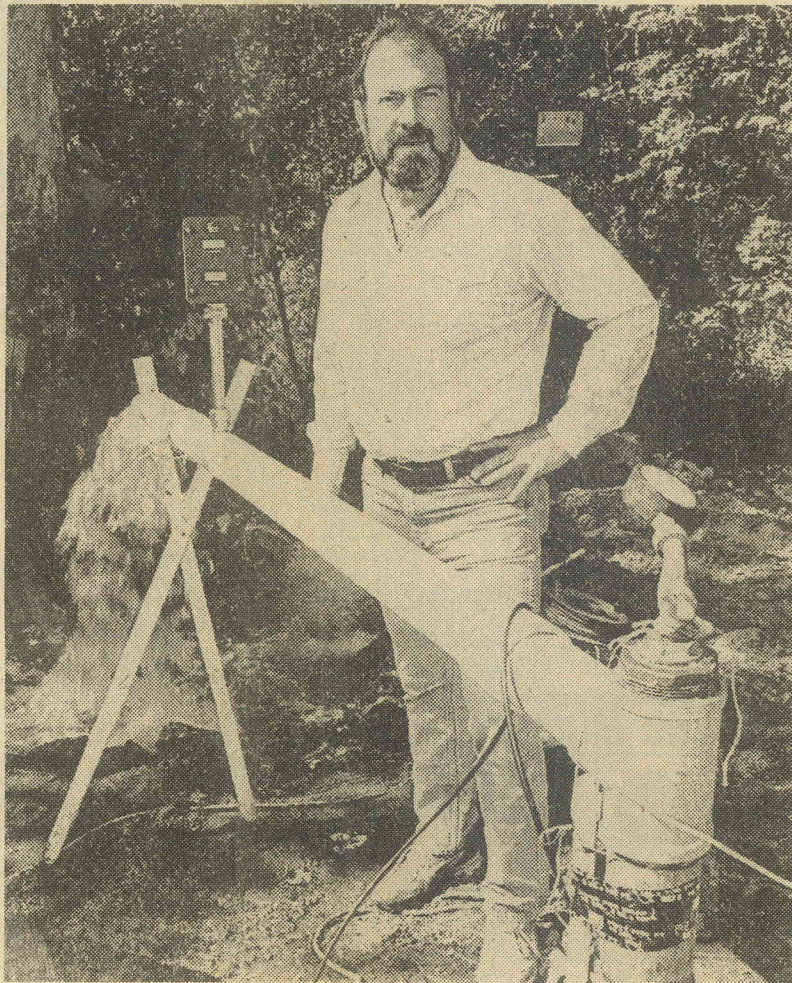
Geologist seeks out well sites

By Melinda Burns
News-Press Staff Writer

Like Dick Tracy to the rescue, Mike Hoover saves desperate farmers from the clutches of drought. He's dug for water in 26 canyons from Santa Barbara to Gaviota, and not a well has failed.

Hobver knows the faults, fractures and fissures that trap underground water. With maps and a practiced eye, he pinpoints blips in the parched landscape, a geologist's signposts for underground water.

Hoover recently tapped a 200-gallon-per-minute supply on La Paloma Ranch north of El Capitan Beach State Park. The water shot out of the ground like an Ok-



Mike Eliason/News-Press

Mike Hoover has dug for water in 26 South Coast canyons, and none of his wells has failed.

lahoma oil gusher.

"Here's a farmer jumping up and down, his avocado trees are

smiling and it's pretty exciting,"

Hoover said, recalling the moment. "It's not that hard. He

PERSONAL

Name: Mike Hoover
Born: May 6, 1949,
Pasadena
Education: B.A., M.A. in
geology from UCSB
Occupation: Engineering
geologist
Diversions: Fishing and
carpentry
Marital status: Single

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just has very good geology."

Hoover has drilled more than 300 successful water wells in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties. In addition to farmers, the clients of Hoover's consulting firm include real estate developers, cities, oil companies and water districts. He studies landslides and earthquake faults and cleans up toxic messes from underground gas tanks.

But it's water that puts a gleam

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Hoover

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in Hoover's eye.

"It's fun to be in charge of a resource that's very elusive," he said. "If you hit one every time you went out there, it wouldn't be half as exciting."

And if water were more predictable, maybe Hoover wouldn't be suffering from an ulcer. With tens of thousands of dollars riding on a single well, he'd better pick the right spot. Sure, it's great to have clients like Jane Fonda and Gene Hackman looking up to you, Hoover said, but you've got to come through.

"All you need is one failure in this business and you're history," he said.

As a water wizard, Hoover has not always been popular with environmentalists. He's faced some hostile questioning at county hearings over the reliability of his wells.

Customarily a jovial sort, Hoover said he took it personally at first. He used to resent the laymen in government who doubted his skill. But with time, he decided it was just their way of turning a project down. Hoover doesn't go to as many hearings now, much preferring the nuts and bolts of geology to the political game.

The slow-growth movement, with accompanying bans on new water meters up and down the South Coast, has brought Hoover a booming business in wells. But he's a little uncomfortable with the prevailing political trend because, he says, it "hurts the mom-and-pop" landowners.

At the same time, Hoover concedes, if there were no constraints on growth "we would have a terrible place to live."

The geologist recently entered the public fray with a water idea that even the environmentalists liked. The City of Santa Barbara, thirsty for water in one of the worst droughts in its history, has just adopted Hoover's plans for nine new wells.

It's simple, Hoover said: By drawing down its underground water basin, the city can stretch its dwindling supply for three more years.

"Why are we sitting here with a tank that's 60 to 90 percent full?" Hoover asked. "That simple logic has prevailed. It's been one of the most satisfying things I've done lately."

It takes years for water to accumulate in the sponge-like sandstone layers of an underground basin. Well water supplies decline during dry periods and must get a rest from pumping later on.

That's why the city must bring in new long-term supplies, Hoover said. He says the dam at Lake Cachuma should be raised. (He predicts that it will rain this year or next.) Hoover opposes importing state aqueduct water to Santa Barbara.

Excited as a schoolboy, Hoover recently took a visitor to La Paloma Ranch to check on his latest well-drilling operation.

"You're going to see a well being cased!" he said. At the dusty site, the bearded, broad-chested geologist leaped out of his car and hurried over to a row of clay and sandstone samples from the deep well hole. He picked up a handful of coarse sand, 20 million years old.

"Good stuff — transmits water," Hoover shouted over the din of the drilling rig. "This is how you find out if you did the right thing."

Nearby, three men painstakingly lowered tube after gigantic tube of perforated plastic casing into the hole. Would the muddy bottom cave in? Would the tubes get stuck in the hole? So many things could go wrong.

"This one's straight as an arrow," the foreman said, as the last piece slid down.

Hoover chuckled.

"It's going to be a star," he said.