

State Pays Valley Farmers Millions To Keep Water In The Ground

San Joaquin Valley Water, 07/25/23

The state is sending millions to farmers throughout the San Joaquin Valley to keep water in the ground.

The money, paid through the LandFlex program, goes to groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) and then directly to farmers, paying them for every acre foot they don't pump.

On July 24, the Department of Water Resources announced awards to the Lower Tule River and Pixley GSAs of \$7.7 million and \$5 million, respectively, and \$4 million to the Westlands Water District GSA.

This is the second round of LandFlex funding. In February, DWR recommended awards of \$9.3 million to Madera County GSA, \$7 million to Greater Kaweah GSA and \$7 million to Eastern Tule GSA.

The LandFlex program has now depleted its funding and it's unclear if more will be forthcoming.

LandFlex is separate from the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program, run by the Department of Conservation. That program aims to find other uses for farmland in order to reduce pumping. In June, three valley groundwater agencies including Westlands, Turlock and agencies in the Merced subbasin, received \$35 million in grants from the Multibenefit program.

Unlike other incentive programs, LandFlex is more of an immediate drought relief solution for at-risk drinking water wells and vulnerable communities, said Teji Sandhu, DWR's LandFlex program manager.

The program requires all participating landowners to fallow their crops for a year. The state pays farmers up to \$350 per acre foot of water saved during that time.

After that, there is a permanent elimination of all groundwater overdraft, meaning landowners in the program can only pump the allotted sustainable amount in their area. Farmers in this stage are paid \$1,000 per acre foot of overdraft eliminated.

Lastly, the program will pay anywhere from \$250-\$2,800 per acre of land that is transitioned to more sustainable uses such as less water intensive crops.

LandFlex could save anywhere from 100,000-200,000 acre feet of water, said Sandhu.

As the name suggests, the program is flexible, she added.

“We were able to kind of turn some of this program, not only as a drought tool, but as a flood tool,” said Sandhu. “We opened up the program to make sure these guys could recharge, especially floodwaters.”

For Pixley and Lower Tule, the land targeted was nearby scattered domestic wells, said Eric Limas, general manager for both districts. Those clusters of domestic wells scored higher on DWR’s assessments, he said.

“The domestic wells that are scattered out and about are drilled pretty shallow and those are the ones that are more susceptible to going dry,” said Limas. “We’re glad to see the state investing in this program because it eliminates overdraft sooner and protects those domestic wells.”

Landowners are in the process of signing contracts and should receive money 45 days later, said Aubrey Bettencourt, CEO of the Almond Alliance which is a contracted technical assistance provider for LandFlex.

In the Westlands GSA, 8 landowners are moving forward in the program. That’s out of 75 who qualified initially, said Bettencourt.

Westlands added additional criteria for DWR to assess. Subsidence-prone areas were also considered in the process since Westlands has many areas that have sunk significantly due to overpumping.

The program focuses not only on protecting domestic wells, but moving landowners to compliance with the state’s Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), which aims to bring groundwater basins into balance by 2040.

LandFlex will, “bear hug SGMA, create that certainty and create that financial backing that allows the farmer to see themselves into a post SGMA world,” said Bettencourt.

Farmers in the San Joaquin Valley have relied more heavily on groundwater as surface water supplies from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta have dwindled for environmental needs and after multiple years of prolonged drought.

As a result, aquifer levels plummeted causing shallow domestic and community wells to go dry throughout the San Joaquin Valley. The effects have lingered, with more than 1,000 wells going dry in the valley even during this very wet year.