

## **California almond acreage shrinks for first time in 25 years**

Thepacker.com, 12/14/22

California's tight water restrictions and low precipitation continues to challenge even the most creative farmers and ranchers. A recent report by Land IQ, commissioned by the Almond Board of California, confirms that even the resourceful almond industry has felt the sting of drought conditions.

For the first time in a quarter of a century, California's almond acreage has decreased instead of grown, according to Land IQ, an agricultural and environmental research and consulting firm. In an August crop report, total almond tree acreage was estimated at 1.64 million acres, down from 1.66 million acres in August 2021, according to a news release.

Land IQ also found that an estimated 30,000 acres were identified as stressed or abandoned. These acres were included in the total acreage because, according to Land IQ, they may still recover.

"Land IQ's report may indicate a possible trend towards lower California almond acreage in the year ahead," Richard Waycott, ABC president and CEO, said in a news release. "This acreage estimate was based on data collected through Aug. 31, so it does not reflect any additional removals that may have occurred as the harvest and post-harvest seasons progressed this fall. Those data will be incorporated in the next acreage estimate to be published in April 2023."

Almond crop production typically begins in August, with final shipments at the end of July the following year.

Echoing Land IQ's findings, the USDA California almond forecast predicts 2022 production will come in at 2.80 billion pounds, 4% lower than 2.92 billion pounds in 2021.

Citing a dry winter and warmer temperatures in early 2022, the USDA forecast outlines how these factors contributed to "a shorter bloom period than in recent years" that was further affected by a late February freeze, causing frost damage in many orchards. While late-blooming almond varieties reported to have fared better than early blooming varieties, according to the USDA, "the 2022 crop is not expected to be as large as the past two years."

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## District Eyes Capital Improvements That Benefit Local Farms and Enhance Service

Acwa.com, 12/15/22

After a comprehensive process that involved local growers, the South San Joaquin Irrigation District (SSJID) Board of Directors approved the District's Water Master Plan (WMP) at its Dec. 13, 2022, meeting.

The WMP, totaling \$191 million, sets the stage for system enhancements to ensure irrigation service reliability over the next 30 years by addressing aging infrastructure, implementing key modernization projects, and outlining financial strategies to pay for necessary upgrades. The plan and Capital Infrastructure Program identifies maintenance, rehabilitation and service improvement projects and priorities, including:

- Improved level of service to meet evolving on-farm irrigation needs (flood conversion to sprinkler and drip/micro methods)
- Regulation and recirculation reservoirs to reduce operational spills and equalize service
- Automated flow control devices
- Canyon Tunnel and other upstream water supply improvements
- Variable rates of pipeline and canal replacement and/or rehabilitation
- Trenchless pipeline rehabilitation program

"This is an unprecedented and exciting time for the District," said Board of Directors Vice President Mike Weststeyn. "This plan will clearly guide our capital project and financial plans for the future and also assures that the identified projects provide the greatest benefit for customers."

Planning for the document began in 2018 and included engagement with the SSJID Board, local municipalities, grower organizations and a 30-member Grower Advisory Committee (GAC). The committee, made up of a representative group of irrigation customers, was established by SSJID to gain stakeholder input and guidance throughout the plan's development. Draft plan recommendations were unveiled at a GAC meeting on Oct. 5, 2022.

"Involving our growers and partners was a critical part of the process," said General Manager Peter Rietkerk. "Their feedback matters; they are the ones who will benefit from the improvements, which will have a positive impact on the area's farming community and the regional economy."

The WMP will be reviewed every five years to evaluate how strategies are being implemented and to update the plan for the next 30 years.

"SSJID owns and operates more than 362 miles of distribution canals and pipelines, most of which were installed in the 1950s and 1960s," said Engineering Department Manager Forrest Killingsworth. "By making the upgrades outlined in the plan and continuously evaluating needs, we can improve service and ensure a dependable system for decades to come."

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## **Longtime Westlands GM Birmingham's last meeting**

Sjvwater.org, 12/20/22

Westlands Water District named its chief operating officer, Jose Gutierrez to oversee the sprawling district in western Fresno County until it hires a new general manager.

Gutierrez will serve as interim general manager until May. The added duties will come with an additional \$50,000 to Gutierrez' \$240,000 annual salary, the board announced at its Dec. 20 meeting.

The meeting was also the final one for longtime, controversial General Manager Tom Birmingham who took the opportunity to praise district staff and the many board members he has worked with since starting out with the district in 1986.

He noted that his first case with Westlands was to defend the district against a lawsuit over drainage issues brought by neighboring irrigators, the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors.

Clay layers in some parts of Westlands trap water that can become toxic with salts and kill plants. Draining and disposing of that water created environmental issues in other areas, prompting legal actions.

"I had hoped that before I rode off into the sunset that issue would be resolved," he said of drainage problems that continue to plague the district.

Birmingham became well-known for his staunch, some called it caustic, defense of Westlands. That defense often included a strong offense where the district sued the federal government and even environmental groups.

The board on Tuesday presented Birmingham with a plaque that included a very long list of accomplishments and applauded him with a standing ovation.

Birmingham announced his resignation from the board in November after an election brought in a group of so-called "change" candidates whose first order of business was to replace him.

Growers had become increasingly frustrated by what they saw as Birmingham's focus on litigation and lobbying for new legislation at the expense of creating collaborative programs closer to home with other water districts, surrounding communities and advocacy groups.

They were also concerned by what they saw as the district's lackadaisical attitude toward the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, particularly in terms of creating more water recharge.

Issues came to a boiling point at Westlands's December 2021 meeting when board members agreed to extend Birmingham's contract another three years, to Nov. 2024, a full year before the current contract was set to expire.

A number of Westlands growers spoke out angrily at the meeting. In the end, the extension passed on an 8 to 1 vote. (Contract discussions begin at hour 1:23)

Per that contract amendment, Birmingham will be eligible for a severance equal to his monthly salary multiplied by the number of months left in his term.

Birmingham's salary was \$420,000 a year, or \$35,000 a month. With 23 months left in his term, that means he may take home a severance amount of \$805,000.

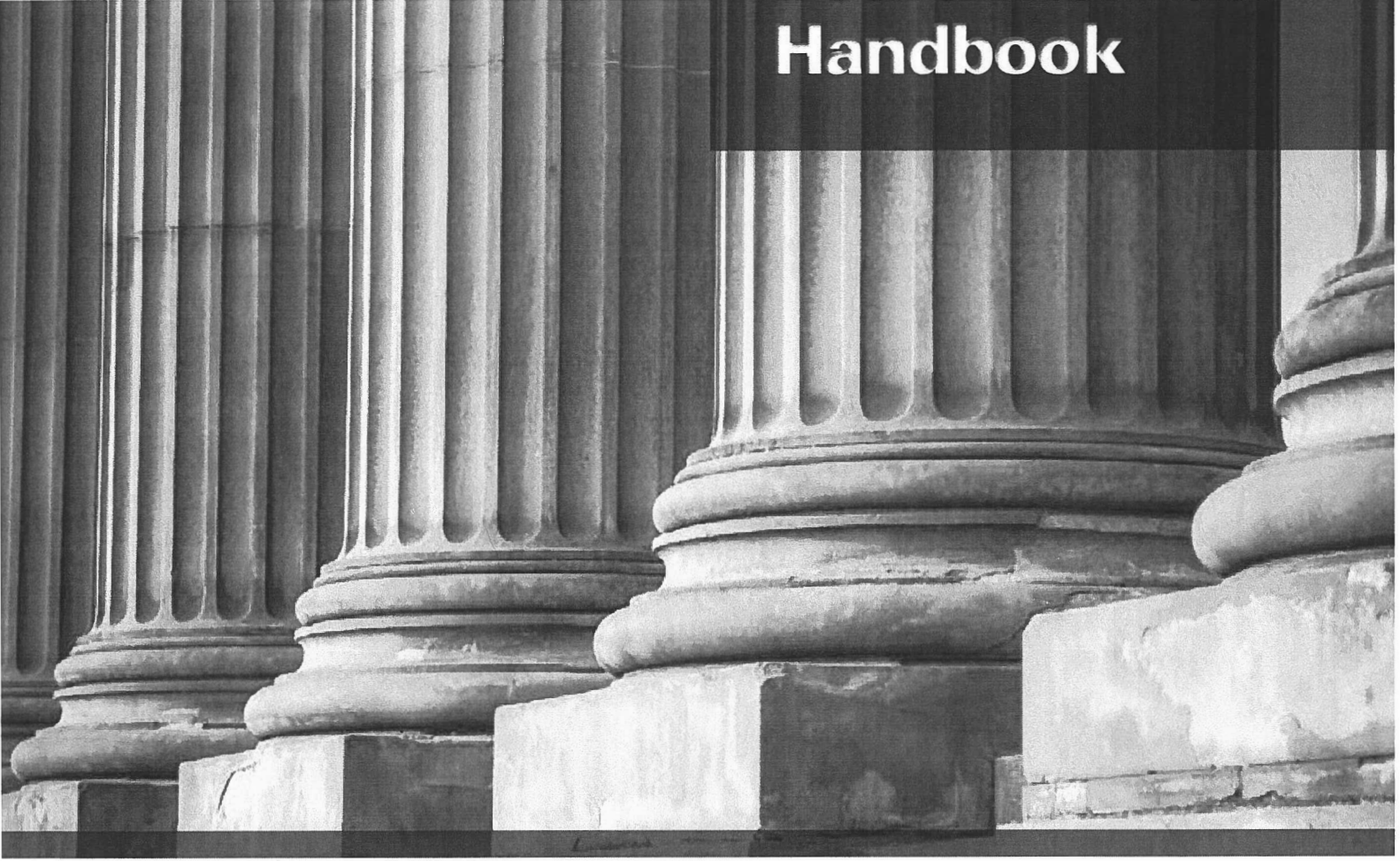
Recruitment for a new general manager will begin as soon as possible, according to Westlands' staff.

In other business, the board voted to change its meeting times from 1 p.m. to 9 a.m. on the third Tuesday of each month.

The next regular board meeting will be Jan. 17 at 9 a.m.

SPECIAL DISTRICT

# Board Member Handbook



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## Primary Roles and Responsibilities

One of the first and most important distinctions to make in your work as a board member is the difference between your responsibilities and those of the general manager and staff. Clearly understanding and respecting these roles, and how they interact, is critical to the long-term success and sustainability of your special district.

### Role of a Board Member

One of the most significant responsibilities as a board member is to understand that the board is a team and you need to work together as such. Understanding the dynamics of the group, as well as the individual perspectives and opinions of your fellow board members, is crucial to the success of the team, the district, and community you represent. This united approach will help to strengthen the district and provide the grounds for maintaining a clear vision of the future, a unity of purpose, and a cohesive board.

The specific responsibilities of the board are clustered into five areas:

1. Setting the direction for the district;
2. Establishing and supporting the policies and structure of the district;
3. Overseeing the financial resources necessary to fund the district;
4. Guiding employee relations policy, including the hiring and supervising of the general manager who, in turn, operates the district and hires/manages its staff; and
5. Serving as community leaders who communicate effectively on behalf of the district.

### *Setting Direction*

The board establishes the special district's mission and vision. In building a mission statement, the board must clearly understand the purpose of the district and answer the question of "why?" Why does the district exist? It will also be helpful for the board to identify core values that guide the district in its mission.

When developing a vision statement, the board must answer the question of "what?" What would the district look like should it accomplish its mission to the fullest extent? Doing so requires agreement on the board as to what the future of the district should look like.



With a mission and vision as its foundation, the board sets direction through the district's strategic plan, which may guide the development of more specific objectives for implementation by the general manager and staff. In developing a strategic plan, the board will evaluate the present, anticipate the future, and prioritize goals that must be accomplished to achieve the vision. Strategic plans should be reviewed periodically and adjusted appropriately.

#### *Establishing Policies*

Policies are written statements specifying the manner in which the district's business is conducted. The board's job is to develop, maintain, revise, and enforce the district's policies. These policies provide needed direction for the general manager and staff, and for the constituents of the district.

One may view a special district's enabling act in California statute as the framework or "constitution" the district must operate under as a "subdivision of the state." However, independent special districts are not state entities, nor are they entities of a city or county. They are independent local governments, which are separate legal entities similar to other municipalities. Board-approved policies, resolutions, and ordinances are the tools by which boards direct the district in achieving its mission and securing its vision within the boundaries of its enabling act.

Board policies should guide district governance, such as board meetings, agendas, and minutes, board conduct, and rules of order. Policies should also be adopted

concerning district finances, personnel, communications, and other key functions.

While policies are approved by the board and may be requested by the board, they are typically drafted and recommended by staff. Sometimes this is done with review and direction of a board subcommittee.

#### *Overseeing Finances*

Boards ensure sound fiscal policy exists and that practices and controls are in place so that the district, board, general manager, and staff have direct accountability to their constituents. Furthermore, the board will approve an annual budget and request and approve periodic reports on the fiscal status of the district.

Commensurate with the board's role in financial oversight and fiduciary responsibilities, it should establish a financial reserve policy and capital improvement plan (CIP). It will also approve contracts of certain size and scope according to State law and board policy. To ensure adequate funding to provide quality services and infrastructure to its community, the board must impose sufficient rates, fees, and taxes.

#### *Guiding Employee Relations*

The board's charge is to support and assess the performance of the general manager, approve personnel policies, establish salary structure and benefits packages, approve memorandums of understanding (MOUs) negotiated with labor, approve job descriptions and organizational structure, and establish a

strong communications link between the board and general manager.

One of the most important decisions a board will ever make is the hiring of a general manager. Other than a district's general counsel and some rare additional exceptions for large special districts, the general manager is the only individual the board hires and supervises.

The general manager is responsible for hiring and supervising all other staff, sometimes through senior or mid-level managers in larger districts. Empowering the general manager to successfully carry out this key duty is critical to the success of the district. This should include a fair and constructive annual general manager evaluation process.

#### *Serving as Community Leaders*

A district and its board are linked in the eyes of the public and often seen as one and the same. Therefore, the conduct of board members reflects upon the district and the community it serves. This holds true during board meetings and formal district events, as well as during other interactions with community, the media, businesses, and other levels of government. Even the personal lives and behaviors of a board member can impact the perception and effectiveness of the district.

In your role as a board member, your board may designate you to formally represent your board to other organizations or participate in ceremonial events. Boards will often establish policies to guide such situations. It is



To expand your knowledge further, visit [csda.net](http://csda.net) to find CSDA's *Sample Policy Handbook*, *Special District Reserve Guidelines*, and CSDA's *California Public Records Act Compliance Manual* to learn more.

important to distinguish when you are speaking on behalf of the board and when you are speaking as an individual. However, as a public official, you should recognize that people will often construe your speech and actions as representative of your district, its staff, and your fellow board members regardless of the manner, time, and place in which they occur. This reality should lead board members to be thoughtful, intentional, and unified, not to be silent or absent.

It is a mistake for a special district to attempt to “fly under the radar.” Transparency is essential to democracy, and scrutiny is inevitable in government. This will be covered more in the next chapter, *Accountability and Transparency*, but here it is important to note that board members play a key role in a special district’s public outreach and engagement efforts. If a special district and its leaders are not telling the story of the district, somebody else will.

### Role of the General Manager and Staff

The general manager is the executive staff officer of the district and for the board. This individual administers the district, providing day-to-day leadership, and maintains exclusive management and control of the operations and works of the district within State law and the policies of the board. In some districts, this position may be referred to as the district administrator, chief executive officer, executive director, district director, or another title. For the purposes of this handbook, it will be referred to as general manager.

Overarching best practices for a general manager include:

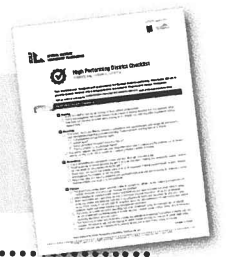
1. Developing and delivering reports to keep the board of directors and public well-informed of district operations and the status of district goals;
2. Providing recommendations on actions requiring board approval, including policies, resolutions, ordinances, and other matters;
3. Maintaining and advancing the operations of the district and implementing those policies, strategies, and directives approved by the board; and
4. Playing an active role in moving the district forward in serving its mission, carrying out its strategic plan, and attaining its vision.

As noted previously, the general manager has authority over and directs all employees, including hiring, supervision, evaluations, promotions, disciplinary actions, and terminations. All directives for staff should be given by the general manager or designated supervisor within the district. Authority may be delegated to other staff or consultants at the general manager’s discretion.

The general manager should dutifully and faithfully carry into effect the lawfully expressed policies of the board, including planning the short, medium, and long-term work program for the district, facilitating constructive and harmonious board relations, preparing and managing the district budget, conducting studies, and delivering written and oral presentations.



Visit [sdlf.org](http://sdlf.org) to download the **SDLF High Performing District Checklist** to provide special districts with best practices related to the areas of finance and human resources.



#### Best practices that make the best board members:

- Do your homework: Read all board packets and materials in advance of meetings.
- Don’t play “gotcha”: Share questions with the general manager in advance of the board meeting.
- Listen first, speak second: Prioritize understanding the perspectives of others.
- Build an expertise: Find an important issue that other board members are not already invested in and become a leader, such as on LAFCO, environmental sustainability, etc.
- Stick to principles, not positions: Develop strong and well-considered principles, rather than digging heels into one position of a false dichotomy.
- Oppose the action, not the implementation: When necessary, vote “No” on a board agenda item, but don’t undermine or obstruct the successful implementation of board-approved decisions. Support and respect the actions of the board as a whole.