

# SJV WATER

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## Fiercely dedicated to the valley, a one-time housing assistance nonprofit emerges as a major player in water solutions

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In a state where there seems to be no middle ground on water, one entity has proudly planted a flag of neutrality.

Self-Help Enterprises' focus is apolitical and purely practical — getting water to people in need.

The Visalia-based nonprofit is known for both its quick response in emergencies as well as sticking around to find long-term solutions for residents of mostly low-income communities in the San Joaquin Valley.

After decades of “boots on the ground” work for valley residents, Self-Help is also emerging as a major player in the agricultural world as groundwater agencies facing possible state action turn to the nonprofit for help.

Under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, critically over pumped regions – including much of the valley – must have plans to bring aquifers into balance by 2040.

But plans covering several valley areas were rejected for, among other things, not being protective of domestic wells and water supplies.

Those groundwater agencies are now facing possible intervention by the state Water Resources Control Board, which could set strict pumping limits and issue heavy fines and fees.

Those agencies are now coming to Self-Help. Meanwhile, the nonprofit has been entrusted with a large state contract to get failing water systems back on their feet even as it continues to serve communities and private well owners in emergencies and on longer term problems from dropping water tables to contamination issues.

How did a small nonprofit focused on low-income housing assistance when it was founded in 1965 become a major player in California water?

### **Untangling the knots**

Step-by-step, or, knot-by-knot, according to Jessi Snyder, Self-Help's Director of Community Development.

"A community cannot thrive without good infrastructure and it soon became evident that water is not going to deliver itself," Snyder said of Self-Help's focus.

Over decades of working to restore broken down wells, helping residents drill new wells, finding treatment options for contamination and hauling water weekly and even daily to drought ravaged communities, Self-Help has kept at it.

"Someone with Self-Help Enterprises will keep untying that knot so we can get the results we need," Snyder said.

That dedication and acquired expertise earned Self-Help a \$40.6 million contract with the state as part of the SAFER Act (Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience), passed in 2019 to fund drinking water solutions for disadvantaged communities.

Under that contract, Self-Help provides technical assistance to failing water systems, helping them navigate the complexities of permitting, funding and regulatory requirements so residents can get clean water.

### **Getting things done**

But SAFER isn't Self-Help's only public contract. It provides numerous services under a combined \$63.9 million from various contracts. Those funds pay for everything from getting bottled water to schools to helping repair drinking water wells.

Self-Help also provides bridge loans and emergency grants, helpful when a well needs to be drilled but the driller can't wait six months for reimbursement from the state.

"We are known for getting things done and being good stewards of the money we are given," said Sue Ruiz, Self-Help's Education Manager.

All of those contracts and services have swelled Self-Help's staffing to 200 employees.

They are well worth it, said Joe Karkoski, Deputy Director of the state Water Board and head of the Division of Financial Assistance.

“They are very much in touch with the communities they are serving,” Karksoki said. “Self-Help is a terrific partner, and we are very fortunate to have them serving these communities because certainly they’ve been some of the communities most impacted by drought and drinking water issues. It’s helpful for us to have these boots on the ground people who can inform our decision making.”

Though other areas in the state have come knocking, Self-Help is “fiercely” dedicated to the valley, Ruiz said.

“There’s a huge amount of work that needs to be done in the valley,” she said.

In just 2022, a punishing drought year, Self-Help’s two main technical assistance programs worked with drinking water systems serving 46,861 households, or 191,013 people, Snyder estimated.

### **Providing connections**

That work and those connections haven’t gone unnoticed by groundwater managers who find themselves in need of such skills under SGMA.

Ruiz said Self-Help’s coordination with groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) is growing exponentially as they work on community outreach.

“We are working with someone within all the subbasins,” she said. “The GSAs don’t manage people, they manage water. When people say that GSAs should assist communities and individuals with their wells, it’s not fair. Self-Help still struggles, even after decades of this work.”

Aaron Fukuda, interim manager at Mid-Kaweah GSA, agreed.

“We always get cast as not doing the right thing when we haven’t even had a shot to get it right,” he said. “No one is more dedicated to getting this right than the GSAs. But we’ve got to get this done, so how do I do it?”

Self-Help has been there with answers, he said.

Their partnership resulted in the 100-home Okieville community near Tulare transitioning from individual domestic wells to a small community water system. Once complete, the project will include a new well, a back-up well, generators and a storage tank for fire flows, all in the middle of two recharge basins.

“It’s a holistic approach to water reliability,” he said.

The Kaweah subbasin is one of the six valley subbasins that will come before the state Water Board for not having an adequate groundwater plan.

The Tulare Lake subbasin, which covers Kings County, is slated to go before the board first on April 16, 2024. The other four subbasins include Kern, Tule, Chowchilla and Delta-Mendota.

### **A new lens**

Ruiz said SGMA has forced GSAs to pay more attention to how agricultural groundwater pumping impacts residential drinking water.

“That lens did not exist when SGMA started. It definitely exists now,” she said.

Madera County GSA Executive Director Stephanie Anagnoson said Self-Help has assisted in writing multiple groundwater plans to assure regular people are involved, particularly those living in disadvantaged communities.

The Madera County GSA covers lands that don't import surface water and rely almost exclusively on groundwater, which means the only way to bring the aquifer into balance is by significantly curbing how much farmers pump.

That's a difficult message to deliver.

To help engage farmers, Anagnoson said the GSA partnered with Self-Help on several grants involving community outreach.

"We are currently applying together on a grant with additional NGOs to do outreach and planning work to support groundwater sustainability around Fairmead," she said.

Self-Help's Community Engagement and Planning team is leading work around SGMA implementation.

The team of four people currently works with eight GSAs in five subbasins in the valley, following their progress with the Department of Water Resources, or in some cases, upcoming probationary hearings with the state Water Board.

### **Mutual understanding is key**

Sonia Sanchez, the team manager, said making sure the voices of disadvantaged communities are heard is key, particularly as GSAs develop their well mitigation plans.

Seeing GSAs adjust their plans based on community comments facilitated by Self-Help staff has been heartening, she said.

The team has also worked to incorporate a board-level seat for residents of these communities at several GSAs, including Lanair, Riverdale and North Kings.

"Some residents are members of advisory committees, but really, decisions are made at the board level and that's where we need these residents to be," Sanchez said.

The team is also providing technical assistance to several GSAs on eight regional block grant awards from DWR's Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program. (MBLRP).

The goal is to create mutual understanding on all sides, something Sanchez said Self-Help is pretty good at after all these years of standing firmly on the middle ground.

"I see a lot of opportunity in the future," she said. "At the end of the day, we all have the same goal. We want to see a sustainable agricultural economy and viable communities."