

# SJV WATER

---

## Report highlights strong interest in farmland transition funds

April 11, 2024

By: Jesse Vad, SJV Water



There was no shortage of interest in the \$90 million in state funding made available through the new Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program, according to the first report released this month on the effort to transition irrigated farmland in overdrafted groundwater basins to less water-intensive uses.

The program was created through a 2021 bill authored by Assemblymembers Robert Rivas (D-Salinas) and Rudy Salas (D-Bakersfield) with the expectation that some farmland will need to be idled in the coming years as part of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. To meet SGMA goals in the Central Valley, it is estimated that up to one million acres of farmland may have to be taken out of production.

In all, 22 applications seeking \$200 million were submitted during two rounds of funding, according to the report. Ultimately, eight applications were awarded about \$75 million in block grants, with the remaining funds set aside for tribes and other uses.

Sonia Sanchez, manager of the community engagement and planning team at nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises, which is one of the organizations administering the program along with the Environmental Defense Fund, said the program is out of money for now but she is hopeful more funding will become available.

“We’re definitely advocating, pushing for more funding from the state to go to programs like this,” said Sanchez. “We’re very optimistic there is support for this type of program from legislators and other government folks that are seeing the value in this type of program.”

Sanchez said a key takeaway from the report is the importance of collaboration across the program. Between the two rounds of applicants there are more than 100 organizations working together on repurposing farmland, said Sanchez.

“I think that really does speak to the importance of collaborations and partnerships but also the interest and need for land transitions,” said Sanchez.

For generations, farmers in the valley have overpumped groundwater, causing aquifer levels to plummet and the ground to sink. Repurposing farmland for other uses, such as solar or wildlife refuges, is one tool the state is targeting to bring aquifers back to sustainable levels.

Six of the eight applicants funded so far are located in the San Joaquin Valley. They include:

- Madera County (\$10 million)
- Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District (\$10 million)
- Pixley Irrigation District Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) (\$10 million)
- Westlands Water District GSA (\$8.89 million)
- Merced Subbasin GSA (\$8.89 million)
- East Turlock Subbasin GSA (\$8.89 million)

New uses for the repurposed farmland include habitat restoration, construction of recharge facilities and dryland farming. The repurposing projects are just getting underway, said Sanchez.

The reasons for interest in the program and its funding vary.

“Some of the generational growers, they either don’t have someone to pass along the operation to or their family members are not interested,” said Sanchez. “There is also interest from some growers to temporarily fallow land. This program has to be at least 10 years. So there are some growers that are looking for that option, where it’s not something super permanent, but it gives them some time to see what they would like to do in the future.”

Some growers are participating because they are exiting agriculture due to the pressures of the industry, added Sanchez.

Sanchez said the option to turn farmland into a recharge basin or recreational land is a way for landowners to continue their legacy in a different way.