

# SJV WATER

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## YEAR ANNIVERSARY: State groundwater sanctions paused but Kings County farmers, water managers moving forward

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Wednesday marks one full year since the state brought the “hammer” down on Kings County farmers for pumping so much groundwater it sank a vast area that could be seen from space, nicknamed “the Corcoran bowl.”

In the year since the Water Resources Control Board put the Tulare Lake subbasin on probation for lacking a plan that would, among other things, stop excessive pumping that is causing land to collapse taking an [entire town](#) with it, state actions were halted by a lawsuit, injunction and appeal.

Probation is the first enforcement step allowed under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), which aims to bring overpumped aquifers into balance by 2040.

The legal actions have put a wall between Water Board staff and Kings County water managers but that doesn’t mean nothing’s been happening.

While state well registration, reporting and fee sanctions are on hold, just about every groundwater sustainability agency in the subbasin has [implemented](#) its own version of those measures.

Some of the region’s five GSA’s are even instituting [penalties](#) for exceeding pumping allocations. They are bringing farmers into the process for greater transparency. Some have contracted with the nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises to protect domestic wells.

And they've all been looking at how other subbasins have avoided state intervention.

"We are incorporating a lot of good ideas into the revised policies and revised (groundwater sustainability plan) which have been accepted in other basins and should set Mid-Kings River up for success to get out of probationary status once the lawsuit is settled," said Chuck Kinney, director of the Mid-Kings River GSA.

The Mid-Kings River GSA had to be [rebuilt](#) last year after it imploded when a key water agency pulled out of the original joint powers agreement when it was blamed for not OK'ing a groundwater plan prior to the April 16, 2024 hearing that led to probation.

A new groundwater plan should be done soon, wrote Deanna Jackson, director of the Tri-County Groundwater Authority, in an email.

Subsidence will be a key focus, she added.

"Tulare Lake region subbasins are collaborating with each other on subsidence cross boundary conditions," she wrote.

How, or whether, the state will react to the changes is unclear given the legal uncertainties, Kinney acknowledged.

"Time will tell if that pays off once we are able to have open dialogue with the state again," Kinney said.

Kings County Farm Bureau executive director Dusty Ference said the lawsuit, filed by the bureau, has "not hurt the subbasin in the slightest."

"The lawsuit is paying off," he said. "Water users have saved tremendous amounts of money not paying well registration fees and water use fees."

He referred to state probationary measures that would have required farmers put expensive meters on wells and pay an annual \$300-per-well registration fee as well as \$20-per-acre-foot pumped, among other fees.

Instead, farmers and local water managers are doing exactly what SGMA intended, he said, creating a plan to protect both groundwater and local agriculture.

Ference also believes the lawsuit had an impact on the outcomes of the Tule and Kern subbasin probationary hearings.

The Tule subbasin was placed on probation but two GSAs were exempted from fees and reporting based on their water accounting budgets. The Kern hearing was continued for four months to Sept. 17, 2025 to give managers time to improve their plans.

"Our lawsuit is credited at least partially for the more favorable outcomes for the Tule and Kern subbasins probationary hearings," Ference said.

A probationary hearing for the [Kaweah subbasin](#) was canceled thanks in part to completely rewritten groundwater plan that included an aggressive, \$5.8 million [domestic well protection](#)

[agreement with Self-Help Enterprises](#) that protects households and small communities from impacts of lowered groundwater levels.

“We watched what was happening in the Tulare Lake subbasin, but we had our own ship with our own course and we had set sail with a direction and purpose ahead of the Tulare Lake hearing,” said Aaron Fukuda, interim general manager of Mid-Kaweah GSA. “We had a lot of discussions with as many groundwater users as possible and we had to make some really difficult decisions quickly. We all agreed that we needed to do something drastic and not hold everything to perfection.”

The Water Board will consider probation for three other subbasins, likely later this year. Those include the Delta-Mendota, Chowchilla and Pleasant Valley subbasins.