

# SJV WATER

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## Reduction in state funding for dry well programs creating angst among groundwater agencies

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A reduction in state funding for a Visalia-based nonprofit is creating a lot of angst among groundwater agencies and prompting hushed conversations about who should pay the bill when domestic wells go dry.

The issue is highly sensitive as the state Water Resources Control Board holds both the purse strings to fund emergency water responses and the hammer over agencies [trying to get groundwater plans approved](#) under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).

Most south San Joaquin Valley groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) have created programs funded by growers to address domestic well issues caused by overpumping. And they've contracted with Self-Help Enterprises, the south valley's go-to nonprofit for contaminated or dry wells, to run those programs.

But Self-Help got \$20 million less than it requested this year from the Water Board for emergency and long-term responses, leading to a lot of questions about who's going to pick up that slack.

And whether the state is trying to dump the bill for all domestic water issues on GSAs.

“Our GSA partners have budgeted for something very different than what they’re being faced with,” said Self-Help program director Tami McVay.

The uncertainty has put Self-Help in an uncomfortable middleman position, she wrote in an email.

“We do not represent the SWRCB nor do we represent the GSAs or subbasins we are contracted with. We represent the thousands of families impacted by this disaster throughout the San Joaquin Valley.”

## **Stop gap**

The level of state funding previously received by Self-Help and other organizations was intended as a “stop gap” resource during the 2020-2022 drought emergency, a Water Board spokesman wrote in an email.

“Therefore, state support should have no bearing on the scope or design of the well-mitigation programs that groundwater sustainability agencies are developing,” the spokesman wrote.

With the drought over, “...the state can step back its support as other domestic well mitigation programs are developed and implemented.”

Another Water Board spokesperson said the state would continue funding “some level of support” for low-income households.

## **Leaning in**

That hasn’t been reassuring to GSAs alarmed by the reduction in funding for Self-Help.

“We truly lean on and value Self-Help Enterprises more than folks understand,” wrote Aaron Fukuda in an email. Fukuda is the interim manager of the Mid-Kaweah GSA, which, along with Greater Kaweah and East Kaweah GSAs, was hailed for a [landmark agreement](#) with Self-Help to respond to well problems caused by over pumping within Kaweah subbasin boundaries.

Nearly all south valley GSAs have followed in the Kaweah subbasin’s footsteps in contracting with Self-Help to work on domestic wells.

“GSAs are not flush with money and a lot of people,” Fukuda wrote. “Self-Help has the teams and the knowledge to do this work, but they need the funding to cover the ground that we cannot.”

McVay said Self-Help’s lobbyists are pursuing its lost \$20 million through Proposition 4 money.

“These programs are essential for everyday life,” McVay said. “They are also expensive and unsustainable at the state-funded level. We don’t have confidence in the security of ongoing funding moving forward from the state Water Board.”

The amounts needed aren’t trivial.

Self-Help requested \$110 million to continue providing tanks and hauled water to residents and \$55 million for well replacement and repairs. It received \$95 million and \$50 million, respectively, McVay said.

Existing funding has been allocated to 268 wells that need replacement, but there are nearly 500 total.

“We don’t have enough to support the amount of wells in our pipeline,” she said.

Self-Help averages 20 well replacements a month throughout the San Joaquin Valley while the organization also helps homeowners find other sources of private funding to drill wells, if needed.

### **Disrupted promises**

The funding shortfall “disrupts the promises we made to the communities,” said Kait Palys Bautista, senior water resources scientist at consulting firm Intera. She took a lead role in crafting the agreement between Kaweah and Self-Help.

“Our goal in designing these (GSA) programs was to minimize stress for affected households, ensuring they wouldn’t have to navigate eligibility complexities on their own. Instead, GSAs and Self-Help would collaborate to connect them with the right solutions.”

McVay and Palys Bautista also noted that not all dry wells are caused by overpumping, a stance many other GSAs are adopting as the scope and cost of addressing domestic well failures mounts.

“It’s important to recognize that not all well failures or water quality issues fall under SGMA’s scope,” Palys Bautista said. “Electrical failures, aging infrastructure, legacy dry wells and groundwater contamination predating SGMA require alternative programs and funding sources. That’s why these additional resources are so critical.”

### **Who should pay?**

Looking ahead, Fukuda said Kaweah’s mitigation program will continue as is “but with a sense that we will likely need to modify,” he said. “What we really need is stability and clear direction.”

He declined to comment when asked if he thought the state was angling to saddle GSAs with all well replacement costs.

McVay said it’s time for a permanent solution.

“We need to be looking at this differently,” she said. “I think the state really does need to come up with a different methodology for sharing costs with the GSAs. I hope at some point we can make this a more deliberate and collaborative process.”