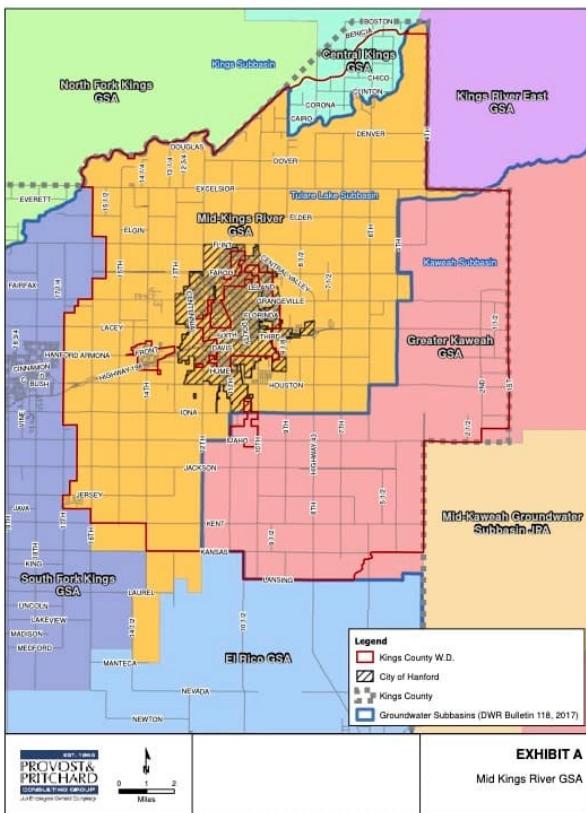


SJV WATER

Hanford-area farmers again facing fees and “very difficult” pumping restrictions

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A Kings County groundwater agency that fell apart last year amid distrust largely over proposed pumping allocations and fees, is again setting pumping limits and fees – this time with farmer input.

At its Oct. 14 meeting, the Mid-Kings River Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) board unanimously approved releasing a draft of its pumping allocation policy for public comment for 45 days beginning Oct. 15.

The allocation policy determines sustainable yield. That's the amount of groundwater that can be pumped out of the aquifer without causing negative effects, such as drying up domestic wells or causing land to sink.

The policy also sets transitional pumping, a buffer amount above sustainable yield, which will decrease to 0 starting in 2040.

The policy sets sustainable yield at 1.43 acre feet of groundwater per acre of land.

Transitional amounts are listed as:

1 acre foot per acre of land from 2026-2030

.6 acre feet per acre of land from 2031-2035

.3 acre feet per acre of land from 2036-2040

“This was a very difficult conversation,” said Amer Hussain, a consulting engineer for the agency, of setting those limits. “We all recognize what we’re essentially assigning to our farmers and to grow a crop on 2.43 (acre feet per acre) then having it drop down to 1.43 is a very difficult thing.”

Board member Doug Verboon agreed. “You can’t do it. You can’t do it at all.”

Mid-Kings will hold at least two public workshops to discuss the allocation policy. One will be in person, the other will be held virtually.

“After the end of that six weeks, we’re going to sit down with the stakeholder committee, we’re going to review all the comments, we’re going to update, revise the document and then bring it back to this board for final approval,” Hussain said.

Board member and County Supervisor Joe Neves inquired about extending the public comment period due to the upcoming holidays.

“We probably should rip the Band-Aid off and get this over with as soon as possible so that we can get out of probation as soon as possible,” Verboon said.

He referred to the Tulare Lake subbasin being placed on probation by the Water Resources Control Board in April 2024. Probation comes with hefty fees and other requirements, which have been held off so far by a lawsuit.

Brian Medeiros, a member of the GSA’s advisory group, agreed that more time was needed, but it was crucial to start the comment period sooner rather than later.

“We have a lot of farmers who still don’t know what they’re going to plant this year,” Medeiros said. “This thing is one of the biggest decisions we’re looking at.”

The GSA also discussed moving forward with a trial of its \$2 million domestic well mitigation program, which was established in August.

Three wells have been identified as candidates for the program. In order to receive aid from the GSA, well owners must show the wells suffered negative impacts after Jan. 1, 2015, the start of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).

SGMA requires local agencies to bring overdrafted aquifers into balance by 2040. Protecting domestic wells is a key issue under SGMA.

Mid-Kings' pilot domestic well program has two goals: One, repair or replace wells damaged by excessive pumping; Two, to get the attention of state regulators, according to one Mid-Kings official.

Board secretary Chuck Kinney told the board the pilot well program could "...help the state (Water Board) to see that the Mid-Kings River GSA is serious about the issues related to groundwater within our area and aid us in, hopefully, getting a favorable decision to be turned back to DWR in the near future once our (groundwater plan) is complete."

The Department of Water Resources (DWR) provides general oversight, not enforcement, meaning the reporting and fee requirements of probation would be lifted.

The Mid-Kings pilot well program will look at potentially replacing the three wells at a cost of about \$108,000.

The well owners are receiving an interim water supply from Self-Help Enterprises, a Visalia-based nonprofit that provides emergency drinking water.

Engineering consultant Hussain said the pilot program will help Mid-Kings understand the costs of hiring Self-Help and replacing wells that meet the program's requirements. It's estimated that 30 wells in Mid-Kings could go dry within a two-year period.

Verboon was concerned that the program could be taken advantage of.

"I don't want to put a target on our back," Verboon said.

Secretary Kinney clarified that the pilot program only guarantees the GSA would evaluate wells to see if they meet the requirements for repair or replacement. Having a bad well doesn't automatically mean the GSA will drill a new one for homeowners.

There's only one issue – the GSA does not have \$2 million to run its well program, nor \$108,000 for the pilot program.

Mid-Kings plans to increase land assessment fees through a Proposition 218 election, which is required when new or increased assessments are proposed, and a Proposition 26 election, which broadens the definition of taxes to include fees for programs that benefit the public.

The land assessment fee is proposed at \$19 per acre and the groundwater pumping fee at \$15 per acre foot pumped.

Last year, the former Mid-Kings board was met with frustrated farmers when it proposed pumping fees at \$25 per acre of land and up to \$95 per acre foot of water pumped.

Things got so bad that the agency ceased to exist after one of its members, the Kings County Water District, left the GSA. The Kings County Board of Supervisors had to step in to rebuild the agency.

