

MODESTO BEE

Stanislaus adopts plan to protect wells in Modesto area, comply with state

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By: Ken Carlson



Stanislaus County supervisors adopted a well mitigation and management plan Tuesday for the groundwater underlying most of the northern part of the county.

County government has jurisdiction over the eastern and western unincorporated areas that are not within irrigation districts — about 22% of the groundwater basin.

Modesto, Oakdale, Riverbank, Waterford, Modesto Irrigation District and Oakdale Irrigation District are the other members of the Stanislaus and Tuolumne Rivers Groundwater Basin Association, which is expected to comply with the state's groundwater mandates.

A groundwater sustainability plan was adopted in 2022 and submitted to state regulators. Two years later, the California Department of Water Resources said the plan was incomplete. The department told the local association to revise the plan to halt a decline in groundwater levels.

According to a report Tuesday from county Water Resources Manager Christy McKinnon, groundwater levels are expected to decline before management efforts reverse the pattern.

Almost 30 wells are at risk of failing if there is no action.

The groundwater plan will focus on mitigations for domestic wells and small drinking water systems that have been impacted by declining groundwater since 2022. It will apply only to wells affected by groundwater depletion, not electrical problems or the effects of age.

Owners eligible for assistance can receive emergency water through a contract with Self Help Enterprises until well replacement or connection to a public system. Applicants may qualify for up to \$40,000 per well.

The member agencies must approve the management plan before the association adopts it Wednesday. The agencies still need to develop action plans for groundwater management in respective areas. The demands on groundwater may be reduced through conservation, land fallowing, a change in crop patterns, and projects such as groundwater recharge.

McKinnon's report said groundwater levels are fairly stable in the Modesto Irrigation District and the western out-of-district area, so action plans are not currently necessary. The county is responsible for implementation in the eastern and western areas.

Supervisor Terry Withrow succeeded in adding a board recommendation for a third-party consultant to review studies on groundwater issues that were done for the eastern and western areas. He said the studies contained conflicting data and results.

"Anybody who has been part of this over the last three to four years has seen we have this east vs. west thing going on," Withrow said.

Supervisor Mani Grewal, who represents most of Modesto, said he wants to make sure urban ratepayers don't subsidize agricultural pumping outside of water districts. In any cost-recovery plan, the parties benefiting from groundwater protections should bear the associated costs, he said.

The local agencies need sustainable groundwater measures to protect drinking water and prevent state intervention such as costly fees and well monitoring. If the state were to intervene, the fees may be \$300 per well in addition to pumping charges up to \$55 per acre-foot.

Read more at:

<https://www.modbee.com/news/business/agriculture/article314474727.html#storylink=cpy>