



California Agriculture Regulatory Update:

Water Supply, Nitrate and Salinity



January 2025

PREPARED BY:



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Introduction

California agriculture continues to face regulations on water quality and quantity, and potentially on water rights. Growers, collectively represented by third parties, respond to expanded monitoring, reporting, and management requirements. This update focuses on activities between July 2024 and January 2025 related to water supply and quality regulations.

- **SGMA**
groundwater basin management
- **ILRP**
on-farm groundwater nitrate contamination prevention
- **CV-SALTS**
salt and nitrate control
- **Bay-Delta Plan**
surface water quality management

Sustainable Groundwater Management Act - SGMA

Background

California passed legislation to formally regulate groundwater in 2014. To this end, the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) assigned priority to each of California's 515 groundwater basins, based on factors such as groundwater pumping, population, and groundwater level history. Ninety-four groundwater basins were assigned high or medium priority. Together with adjudicated areas (where legal judgments negate the need for a GSP), the area represented by high and medium priority basins represents 98% of all pumping (20M ac-ft/year); 83% of the California's population (25M people) and 88% of irrigated land (6.7M ac).

Groundwater Sustainability Plans

California DWR empowered local agencies, called **Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs)**, within the 94 high and medium priority basins to plan how to balance their overdrafted groundwater basins by 2040. These plans, called **Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs)**, were submitted to DWR for approval in 2020 and 2022 depending on subbasin priority and overdraft status.

GSP 5-year Updates

It's January 2025, which means the first 5-year GSPs are due to DWR by the end of the month. GSAs in high priority, critically overdrafted basins were required to submit their first GSPs in January 2020, which included GSPs (and alternative plans) from the Eastern San Joaquin, Merced, Delta-Mendota, Chowchilla, Madera, Westside, Kings, Kaweah, Tulare Lake, Tule, Kern, Santa Cruz Mid-County, Pajaro Valley, 180/400 Foot Aquifer, Paso Robles, Loso Osos, Cuyama Valley, Oxnard, Pleasant Valley and Borrego Springs. The remaining GSAs, which submitted their GSPs in January 2022, will submit their 5-year updates in January 2027.

Status of Inadequate GSP Probationary Hearings

The State Water Resources Control Board is intervening in GSAs from six basins, whose GSPs were classified as inadequate. Probation is the initial step in the direction of state-governed pumping if GSPs aren't revised to DWR's satisfaction within one year. During the probationary period, farmers must meter and register wells, pay pumping fees, and begin reporting extractions.

- 1. Chowchilla** – The probationary hearing is planned for 2025 but being the least prioritized of the six inadequate GSPs, a date has not been set. DWR determined that GSP actions to address groundwater level stabilization and subsidence were inadequate in the original and revised plans.
- 2. Delta-Mendota** – A new single GSP (replacing the six original GSPs) was adopted by all 23 GSAs in the Subbasin in fall of 2024. The probationary hearing is planned for sometime in 2025, but no date has been set.
- 3. Kaweah** – Probation hearings scheduled for November 2024, then January 2025, were cancelled to give DWR more time to continue to review revised GSPs that were submitted in June and October 2024. Though the review is not complete, the Kaweah Subbasin is currently not under probation and is continuing to manage groundwater.
- 4. Kern** – The probationary hearing is scheduled for February 20, 2025. At this public hearing, the State Water Resources Control Board will consider if the Kern County Subbasin should be put on probation.
- 5. Tulare Lake** – The Tulare Lake hearing took place on April 16, 2024, when the State Water Resources Control Board designated the Subbasin as probationary. Though the State Water Board required all groundwater extractors in this Subbasin to track their groundwater use beginning July 15, 2024 and pay fees, a Kings County judge temporarily blocked these requirements with a court order. As of November 7, 2024, the probationary designation remained suspended because of ongoing litigation. Groundwater extractors are required to pay fees for well registration and pumping.
- 6. Tule** – The probationary hearing was held in September 2024. DWR determined that the revised GSP submitted in August 2024 did not adequately address subsidence, but exempted Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District and Kern-Tulare Water District GSA from pumping reporting requirements and fees. Significantly, the State Water Resources Control Board also defined a path to get out of probation called the “good actor” clause, based on their compliance with SGMA.

[Learn More](#)



California Department of Water Resources

<https://water.ca.gov/programs/groundwater-management/sgma-groundwater-management>



Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program - ILRP

Background

The ILRP is a complex regulatory program with many components. Initially, its focus was on developing and implementing **Irrigation and Nitrogen Management Plan (INMP) Summary Reports**. Farmers report on how much irrigation and nitrogen they are applying and submit this information to their water quality coalitions, who then summarize this information in a report to the Regional Water Quality Control Board. This information informs the overall strategy to manage nitrogen inputs to groundwater, which is an overarching program that everything else fits into called the **Management Practices Evaluation Program (MPEP)**. The MPEP is supported by the recent development of Groundwater Protection Targets.

Crop-specific Acceptable Ranges of Nitrogen Applied Relative to Nitrogen Removed

ILRP Coalitions are required to determine acceptable ranges for multi-year nitrogen applied/nitrogen removed ratios for each crop. These ranges differ from the Groundwater Protection Targets approved in 2024 in that they apply to the entire Central Valley, are crop-specific, are applied at an individual parcel or grower scale, and were developed to manage rather than quantify nitrogen fertilizer impacts to water quality. GWP Targets, on the other hand, were determined for specific townships, are not crop-specific, apply only to high vulnerability townships within Coalitions, and are used to directly quantify impacts to water quality. These ranges will be used to evaluate growers' applied nitrogen in the Irrigation and Nitrogen Management Plans and Reports compiled by their representative coalitions. Comments on the proposed ranges are due to the Water Board by February 21, 2025.

[Acceptable Ranges Report](#)

ILRP Stakeholder Meetings

Stakeholder meetings, now held approximately twice per year, bring together all stakeholders and other parties interested in the ILRP process. The Central Valley Water Quality Control Board, State Water Resources Control Board, and ILRP water quality coalitions report on status and recent activities. They also include special topics relevant to ILRP regulation and compliance, such as technical consultant work supporting ILRP program development. The next meeting is scheduled for March 26th via Zoom and is open to the public.



Learn More



California Department of Water Resources

www.waterboards.ca.gov/centralvalley/water_issues/irrigated_lands/ilrp_decision_tree.pdf



Central Valley Salinity Alternatives for Long-term Sustainability - CV-SALTS

Background

CV-SALTS is a collaborative initiative between industry, government, agriculture, and communities to address and control nitrate and salt accumulation in California water supplies. While the CV-SALTS salt control program is implemented at the Central Valley wide scale, the nitrate control program is administered by local organizations called Management Zones. Both programs apply to all industries and local governments, but the nitrate program is implemented by prioritizing areas according to nitrate exceedances (above the drinking water standard) in groundwater.

Currently, the initial phase of the salt control program is under way, Priority 1 Management Zones are implementing their plans, and Priority 2 Management Zones have formed following a notice to comply in late 2023.

Salt Control Program Prioritization and Optimization Study

The Prioritization and Optimization (P&O) Study began in December 2021 and is expected to take 10 to 15 years. The first task of this study was to complete a Baseline Characterization Report, which compiled data including land use, water quality, salt sources, and other information relevant to both science and policy of salt management. The information in the Baseline Characterization Report will be used as foundational information for the remainder of the study, which aims to predict how different management approaches will affect salt accumulation in different parts of the Central Valley under various scenarios, such as drought, and natural factors such as soil type and climate. This report was finalized in early 2024.

The P&O Study consultant team is currently working on completing an archetype study in the Delta-Mendota Subbasin. Archetype studies represent larger parts of the Central Valley and are used to evaluate salinity targets for protecting agricultural and municipal water uses. The Delta-Mendota Subbasin was selected as the first archetype area because it is a high priority for salinity management and has adequate groundwater data with which to perform modeling, among other variables. With completion of the first archetype study, work will begin on the second archetype, which the CV-SALTS Executive Committee has chosen to be the western portion of the Kings Subbasin. Work will also begin to identify and categorize salt management alternatives and technologies .

Nitrate Control Program

Priority 1 Management Zones continue to implement their Implementation Plans and are currently working on outreach and plan implementation surrounding Initial Focus Areas, which are prioritized areas of the Management Zones.

Permittees in Priority 2 Management Zones submitted their Preliminary Management Zone Proposals (and Early Action Plans) on or before December 31, 2024. These documents are available for public comment and the Regional Board has planned a public workshop for January 31 to discuss their content.

Priority 2 Management Zones include:

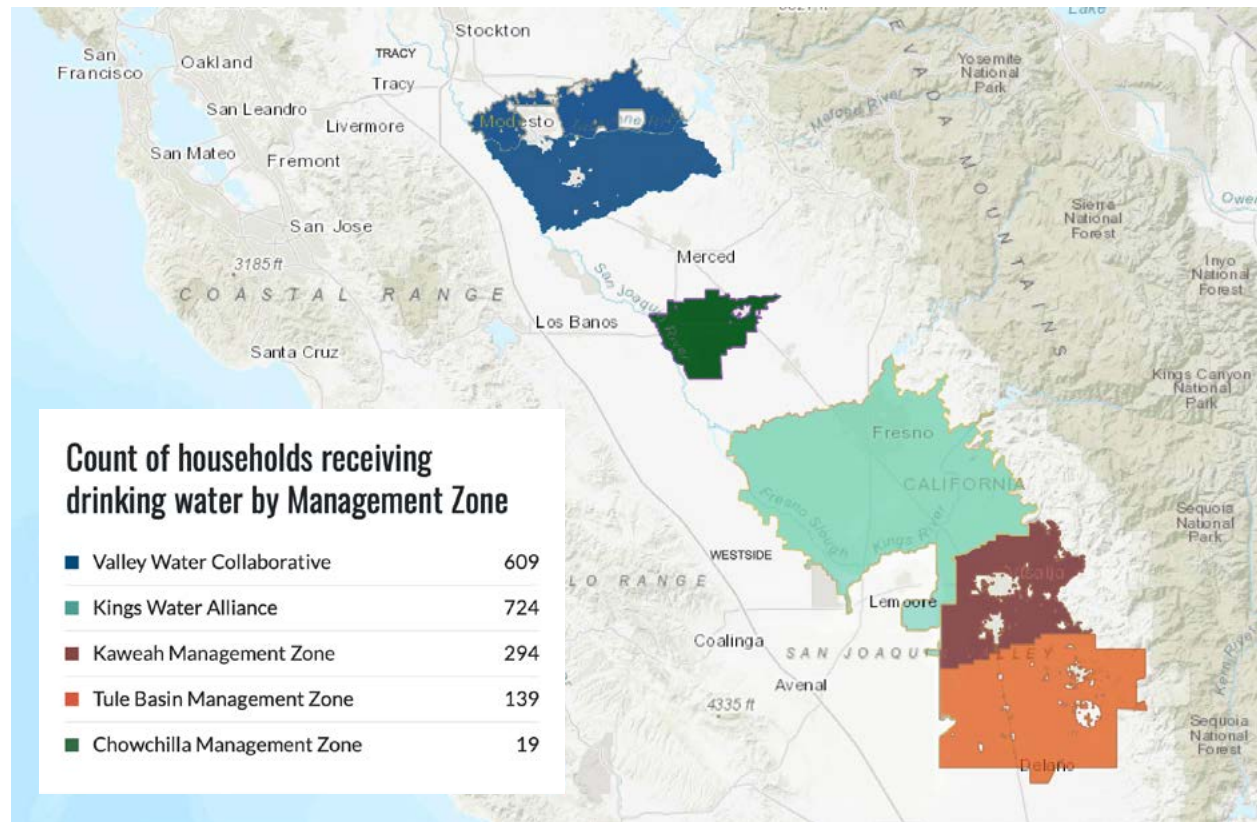
Kern Water Collaborative – Kern (Poso), Kern (Westside South) Subbasins

Kings Water Alliance – Tulare Lake Subbasin

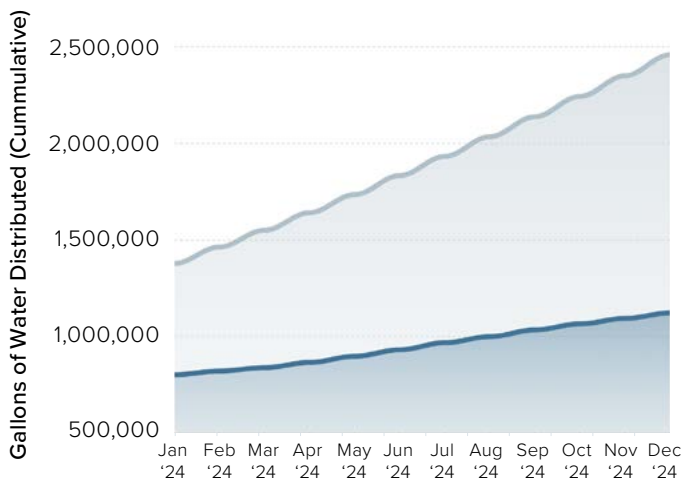
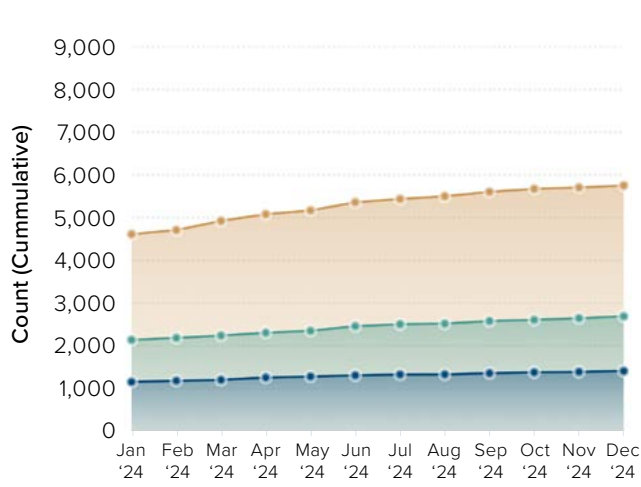
Valley Water Collaborative – Delta-Mendota, Eastern San Joaquin, Madera, Merced and Yolo Subbasins (Valley Water Collaborative also includes Priority 1 Management Zones)

Outreach activities of the Nitrate Control Program are summarized in the figures below.

Total households receiving water (1,621) from Priority 1 Management Zones



Accessed January 10, 2025. Source: <https://cvsalts.mjenv.com>



Monthly Data (Last 12 Months)

- Applications Submitted
- Eligible Wells Tested
- Wells Above Nitrate Standard

2,691
Wells tested since 2021

Monthly Data (Last 12 Months)

- via filling stations
- via bottles

3,580,657
Gallons of water distributed since 2021

Accessed January 10, 2025. Source: <https://cvssalts.mjenv.com>

[Learn More](#)

CV-SALTS

www.cvsalinity.org

Valley Water Collaborative (Modesto and Turlock subbasins)

<https://valleywaterc.org>

Chowchilla Management Zone

<https://www.maderacountywater.com/cv-salts>

Kings Water Alliance

<http://kingswateralliance.org>

Kaweah Water Foundation

<http://www.kaweahwater.org>

Tule Basin Management Zone

<https://www.tulemz.com>



Bay-Delta Plan

The “voluntary agreements” approach advanced by a group of state, federal and local agencies is now referred to as the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program. In October 2024, parties to this program submitted a package of materials to the State Water Resources Control Board that included drafts of a science plan, an early implementation projects list, flow accounting procedures, non-flow accounting procedures, and a funding plan.

Agreements by Program parties propose to restore 7,000 acres of aquatic habitat, enhance up to 40,000 acres of floodplain, and support up to 800,000 acre-feet of environmental water flow in wet years. The Program includes a governance program, a science program, monitoring, reporting and promises to continue Tribal engagement and governance. The Program intends to improve environmental conditions in several large rivers in California as well as the Bay-Delta estuary, with the aim of reversing the decline in fish populations. The Program includes monitoring and adaptive management that will be evaluated at the end of the first 8 years.

Program cooperators include US Bureau of Reclamation, State Water Contractors, Northern California Water Association, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, and several water supply and irrigation districts.

Learn More

Bay-Delta Watershed

www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/

Bay-Delta Plan Update and Implementation

https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/bay_delta_plan/water_quality_control_planning/



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