

SJV WATER

Kaweah managers link arms with Self-Help in new domestic well partnership

June 13, 2024

By: Lisa McEwen



Kait Palys, Senior Water Resources scientist at Intera and consultant for East Kaweah Groundwater Sustainability Agency, discusses a new domestic well partnership with Self-Help Enterprises at a joint meeting with the Mid- and Greater Kaweah groundwater agencies June 13, 2024. Lisa McEwen / SJV Water

When the next drought hits and domestic wells start going dry, many rural Tulare County residents will have a sturdy, new lifeline to grab onto.

Groundwater managers in the Kaweah subbasin, in the northern portion of Tulare's flatlands, signed a \$5.8 million annual deal with Self-Help Enterprises to provide rapid response and long-term fixes focused on residential wells.

The deal is codified in the region's newly minted groundwater sustainability plan as well.

Managers hope this, and other changes, will keep the region from being put on probation by the state Water Resources Control Board. A probation hearing for Kaweah is set for Nov. 5. Probation is the first step in a possible state takeover of local pumping.

The agreement, which took 13 months to craft, was approved Thursday, June 13 at a joint board meeting of the three Kaweah subbasin groundwater sustainability agencies, where they also released their revised groundwater plan for a 30-day public comment period.

The agreement with Self-Help, a Visalia-based nonprofit focused on housing and water assistance, is the first of its kind in the state. Groundwater managers in the Kern subbasin are in talks with Self-Help to create a similar partnership there.

Self-Help is known for its ability to respond quickly to residents experiencing a water crises. Over the past 10 years, it has regularly provided emergency bottled water and helped communities find long-term solutions for a reliable water supply through a variety of state-funded programs.

In the Kaweah agreement, residents whose wells are impacted would receive bottled water within 24 hours. Within 72 hours, the residents would be enrolled in a hauled-water program and a large water tank to support the household would be installed.

To comply with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, groundwater agencies must ensure that domestic wells are protected if groundwater levels drop too low. Unlike a groundwater agency, Self-Help is already equipped to respond promptly to desperate calls for help.

“The GSAs are focused on achieving groundwater sustainability in a broader sense,” water managers wrote in a press release. “By partnering with Self-Help Enterprises, we can be more successful at helping residents who face these issues.”

The annual income stream from the GSAs is also a shot in the arm for Self-Help, which relies on slow reimbursements from the state for the majority of its funding. The agreement is expected to increase Self-Help’s ability to respond to more requests and it will also expand eligibility for those who may not have qualified under state programs.

Self Help staffers who were in attendance at the June 13 meeting received a round of applause when the agreement was officially approved. As boots-on-the-ground responders, they understand that when a well goes dry, life grinds to a halt. No laundry, showers or washing dishes.

“Losing water is a stressful life event,” said Tami McVay, Program Director at Self-Help. “Our staff is ready and able to work with even more Valley residents to address their water needs.”

The program will be paid for by landowners through pumping fees, some as high as \$500 per acre foot.