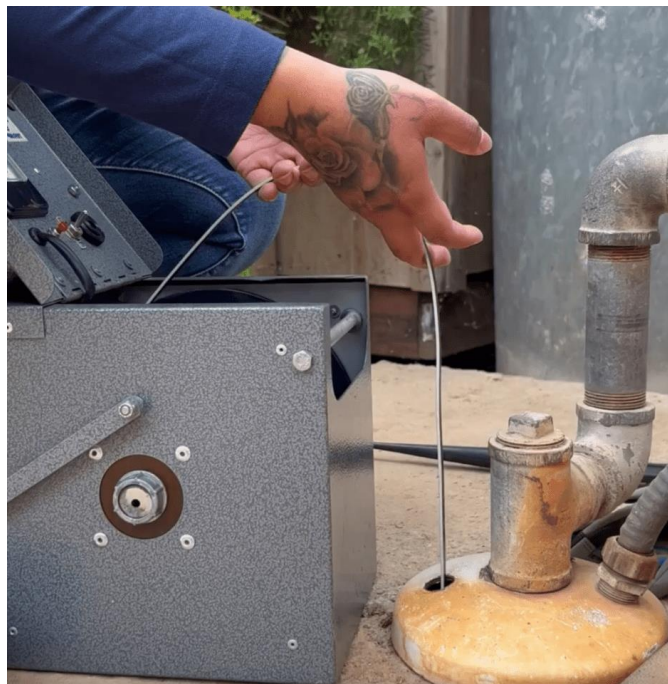


SJV WATER

Domestic well program gets mini launch in Tule subbasin as water managers worry about one agency's ability to pay its share long term

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By: Lisa McEwen



Board members of Eastern Tule Groundwater Sustainability Agency signed a deal with Self-Help Enterprises this week to respond to dry or damaged drinking water wells.

The deal may, or may not, be extended throughout the Tule subbasin as part of a larger effort by managers to revamp their groundwater plan and submit it to the state Water Resources Control Board by July 1 to try and stave off state intervention.

But if this one piece of the larger puzzle is any indication, July 1 may be a pipe dream for a cohesive plan as other water managers are negotiating their own deals with Self-Help and questioning Eastern Tule's ability to pay for a well program long term.

Eastern Tule agreed to launch a pilot program with the Visalia-based nonprofit at its June 17 meeting, approving up to \$90,000 for Self-Help to identify a dry domestic well and restore water to the household.

Eastern Tule Manager Rogelio Caudillo said the pilot program is a “one-time deal.”

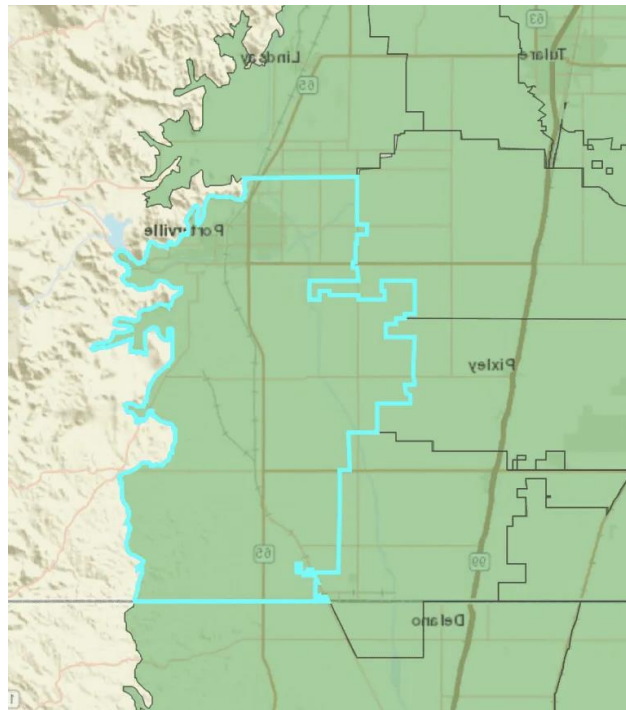
The [agency estimates it would need at least \\$10.4 million](#) to address domestic wells that may go dry as it ramps down what’s known as “transitional pumping” over the next 10 years to reach sustainability by 2040, per the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

Though the domestic well program is designed to be expanded across the Tule subbasin, similar to the Self-Help program recently [launched in the neighboring Kaweah subbasin](#), that may be tricky considering concerns over Eastern Tule’s revenue.

Lower Tule River Irrigation District and GSA manager Eric Limas said while subbasin managers have been discussing altering their individual domestic well plans into one that covers the entire subbasin, Self-Help has requested individual agreements with each of the Tule subbasin’s five GSAs. Eastern Tule was the first to approve it.

Other groundwater agencies in the area, along with the Friant Water Authority, have accused Eastern Tule of employing [questionable groundwater accounting methods](#) that they say have incentivized continued over pumping and shorted anticipated revenue from transitional pumping fees.

Eastern Tule charges pumpers \$310 or \$500 per acre foot for pumping that goes beyond the grower’s base allocation. That amount above the base is “transitional pumping” and is set to expire in 10 years.



The Eastern Tule Groundwater Sustainability Agency covers about 162,000 acres in southern Tulare County. SCREEN SHOT: Department of Water Resources GSA map viewer

Of the money it collects for that transitional pumping, it hands over 91% to the Friant Water Authority to help pay to rebuild a 33-mile section of the Friant-Kern Canal through Eastern Tule's boundaries that had sunk due to over pumping.

Friant has since sued Eastern Tule saying it's accounting methods have allowed growers to skirt the transitional pumping allotments and shorted payments to Friant.

Funding for the Self-Help program, along with fighting the lawsuit and other expenses, is expected to come from the remainder of those transitional pumping fees, according to Eric R. Quinley, General Manager of the Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District and GSA.

"We can't participate (in a joint domestic well program) until the other GSAs can provide a level of certainty that they can fund the program going forward based on their streams of revenue," Quinley said. "This all comes from unsustainable pumping fees, and if you need more money, you need more unsustainable pumping to fund it. If this was a land-based fee, that would be a different story."

Eastern Tule landowners [voted down a land assessment fee](#) in 2021.

"It's not that we don't want to cooperate, it's that we can't risk our future for something that is out of our control," Quinley said.

For its part, Self-Help is focused on working with all parties to protect drinking water for vulnerable residents.

"Some of the GSAs are having a harder time getting everyone on board, and this pilot program shows proactiveness in the subbasin," said Tami McVay, Self-Help's program director. "This will help build a bridge over the gap of trust that exists between local agencies, growers and Self-Help."

The need to protect domestic wells in the Tule subbasin is substantial.

According to a state analysis of the Tule subbasin's initial groundwater plan, more than 500 domestic wells could go dry under that plan.

The subbasin is scheduled for a probationary hearing Sept. 17 before the Water Board.

Probation would mean growers would have to register their wells at \$300 each, meter them, report extractions and pay the state \$20 per acre foot on top of fees they're already paying local groundwater agencies. If, after a year, Tule subbasin water managers and the state can't work out an adequate plan to stem over pumping in the region, the state could take over pumping management entirely.