

SJV WATER

Visalia-based nonprofit swamped by requests for help from San Joaquin Valley groundwater agencies

July 30, 2024

By: Lisa McEwen



Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit that works with rural valley residents whose wells go dry, may need a little help of its own as more and more groundwater agencies are hoping to use it as a pillar in their plans to reach sustainability.

The [nonprofit](#) already has a \$5.8 million annual contract with groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) in the Kaweah subbasin, a one-time \$90,000 contract with the Eastern Tule GSA and a \$90,300-per-domestic well in the Delano-Earlimart Irrigation District GSA, both in the Tule subbasin.

And it's in talks to provide services to GSAs in the [vast Kern subbasin](#).

"They've definitely made it clear that they are evaluating their capacity," Delano-Earlimart General Manager Eric R. Quinley said. "They are driven by staffing and funding like all of us."

Meanwhile, Self-Help is also still providing emergency relief water to thousands of residents and working on numerous state-funded domestic well projects.

“Some of our staff members are answering emails saying we’re swamped, and that’s true,” said Tom Collishaw, Self-Help’s CEO. “But we are taking a measured approach. We are certainly not cutting off the possibility of working with others.”

With only 60 employees focused on water issues, Self-Help is juggling a lot and will need to ramp up to accommodate all the GSA requests, Collishaw said.

“We are not risk-averse, but we are failure-averse,” Collishaw said. “We don’t want to take on things if we can’t accomplish them.”

But the flood of requests from GSAs is not totally unexpected.

“Going forward, we recognize that at some point the state will get out of the business of domestic well work at this level and look to the GSAs to incorporate some of this work in their plans,” Collishaw said.

Under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), local groundwater agencies were tasked with creating plans to sustainably manage the area’s withering aquifers. One of the main commandments under SGMA is to make sure domestic wells are protected from overpumping.

As several valley GSAs revamp their plans, they are hoping to tap into Self-Help’s well-established system of emergency water response combined with long-term solutions, rather than reinvent the wheel.

Quinley said Delano-Earlimart reached out in September 2023 to begin formulating a domestic well mitigation program, and he’s thankful Self-Help is able to provide what he calls an “A to Z program,” from emergency response to finding a permanent water supply solution.

Other GSAs are hoping to form similar partnerships with Self-Help.

“This has been almost a natural process,” Collishaw said. “Five years from now, we don’t expect to have any contracts left with the state, but have only GSA contracts. That is where our capacity will be concentrated.”

That may be a more secure source of revenue than relying on state budget whims. For example, [\\$17.5 million in funding](#) for Self-Help’s emergency response program was on the chopping block in June as state lawmakers navigated a gaping two-year \$56 billion deficit.

The crisis was averted with a \$30 million contract amendment, allowing Self-Help’s work in domestic wells to be funded at its current scale through at least May 2025.

Transitioning to working with GSAs, though, is also dependent on those agencies getting their plans approved by the state. That hasn’t happened for GSAs in the Kern, Kaweah, Tule, Tulare Lake (Kings County), Chowchilla and Delta-Mendota (Merced County) subbasins.

Tulare Lake has already been placed in probationary status, under which the state requires farmers to meter and report extractions. A lawsuit has put those requirements [on hold temporarily](#). The other subbasins have probationary hearings scheduled.

That puts Self-Help in a somewhat delicate position.

As an expert organization in the San Joaquin Valley domestic well landscape, Self-Help is a respected critic of what will or won’t work to protect those wells. As such, it often provides comments to the state on the very GSA plans that may also seek to incorporate Self-Help’s aid.

“We’re not here to call balls and strikes or point out bad actors,” Collishaw said. “We’re not taking any position on issues like probationary status, but we will comment on where we think these plans can be strengthened, and will continue to do that. We want to be part of the solution if the GSA thinks we are part of the solution. Either way is fine with us, we’re not doing one to get work from the other.”

SJV Water is an independent, nonprofit news site covering water in the San Joaquin Valley, www.sjvwater.org. Email us at sjvwater@sjvwater.org