

SJV WATER

First-of-its kind partnership brings running water back to Tulare home

November 15, 2024

By: Lisa McEwen



About 50 people gathered at a house on the outskirts of Tulare Thursday to celebrate a monumental shift in accountability to provide what most people take for granted – reliable water.

Having running taps was exhilarating and relieving for the homeowner, but how it happened was even more significant. So much so that the vice chair of the state Water Resources Control Board made the trek to the San Joaquin Valley to commemorate the event.

“This is really significant because it is an on-the-ground example of what the state intends, which is sustainable management of groundwater resources at the local level,” Water Board Vice Chair Dorene D’Adamo said.

She praised the three groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) that cover the Kaweah subbasin for embodying the letter and spirit of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), passed 10 years ago to mandate aquifers be brought into balance.

The Kaweah agencies joined with Visalia-based nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises to create a [first-of-its-kind partnership](#) to fix domestic wells that go dry because of agricultural over pumping. Thursday’s event celebrated their first joint project.

It was that kind of innovative thinking to protect other water users that, in part, earned the Kaweah subbasin a “get out of probation” card from Water Board staff – which happened Friday.

The Water Board serves as SGMA’s enforcement arm and has authority to place subbasins without acceptable groundwater plans on probation, which entails registering and metering wells as well as fees of \$20 per acre foot pumped. If regions don’t come up with an acceptable plan after a year of probation, the state could step in and set its own pumping limits.

The Kaweah subbasin had been recommended for probation with a hearing scheduled for Jan. 7. But Friday, Water Board staff delayed its probation recommendation to spend more time studying a new groundwater plan submitted by the Kaweah GSAs in June.

Until the Kaweah partnership stepped in, the Tulare homeowner had relied on water hauled to a temporary tank under a state program after his well went dry in 2023.

Since 2016, the Water Board has provided nearly \$200 million for emergency water aid, D’Adamo said. Of that, about \$75 million was spent on drilling 880 new wells.

“It’s robust, but not sustainable and that’s why these partnerships are so critical,” D’Adamo said of the state’s assistance. “We are encouraged to learn that other basins are looking at the Kaweah mitigation program and following its example. You should be very proud of that.”

Engineer Abishek Singh of Intera, who works with Kaweah subbasin managers, said the subbasin has made great strides to work collaboratively and find practical solutions to the region’s stubborn water problems.

“We’ve been on quite the journey here,” Singh said. “Groundwater moves slowly, and sometimes solutions move at that same pace. But what we’re seeing in the San Joaquin Valley is record-breaking.”

For the homeowner and his family, having the Kaweah water agencies and Self-Help partner to fix their well was life altering.

“It doesn’t matter what economic level you are, when you don’t have water, your whole life stops,” he said. “Your kids can’t take a shower after soccer practice, and you can’t flush the toilet. We’re thankful to Self-Help Enterprises and the GSAs. We also want to thank the Lord, because without Him, none of this would have happened.”