

SJV WATER

Kern subbasin given another four months to fix issues with groundwater plans

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The state Water Resources Control Board voted Thursday to give Kern County water managers more time to continue refining plans for how they will bring the critically overdrafted subbasin into balance by 2040.

They now have until June 20 to make revisions to plans that were most recently [submitted to the state](#) in December 2024. Those were the fourth versions of groundwater plans Kern has sent to the state since 2020.

The region's probation hearing was continued to Sept. 17, if needed, after Water Board staff reviews the newly refined plans submitted in June.

Board members [added a requirement](#) to the reprieve, however. Groundwater agencies must demonstrate that they are reaching out to, and working with, community members and small farmers.

That language was added after several rural community members objected to giving water managers more time, saying water quality must be fixed now.

"We're tired of seeing our loved ones suffering from illnesses," said a resident of rural Kern County through Jesus Alonso with Clean Water Action who interpreted for him via a remote connection.

After acknowledging the likely outcome of the hearing, that the subbasin would be given more time, Clean Water Action director Jennifer Clary asked board members to require groundwater agencies to reach out to residents, small water systems and others.

“Delay helps ag, well, great,” Clary said. “ But it hurts communities. And the attitude seems to be that’s OK because they’ve been getting screwed all along.”

Derek Yurosek, chair of the Kern Subbasin Coordination Committee, said he was disappointed to hear that residents were left out and committed to working with other groups to increase outreach.

Though Water Board members, staff and others agreed the Kern subbasin has come a long way from its disjointed start that one water manager likened to “herding cats,” the plans are still missing the mark in several key areas.

The plans are still not protective enough of drinking water wells, allowing up to 255 wells to go dry by 2040, Water Board staff noted. The problem remains “minimum thresholds,” a sort of rock bottom line for groundwater levels that water managers must strive to avoid.

Earlier Kern subbasin plans had much lower minimum thresholds and groundwater agencies right next door to one another often had wildly different thresholds.

Though the newest plans raised the thresholds an average 33 feet, in some cases more than 100 feet, across the subbasin and capped all thresholds at no more than 61 feet below historic lows, it wasn’t protective enough given the disparity in hydrogeological conditions in the subbasin, according to staff.

A team of consultants representing the Kern subbasin detailed how exceedances of those minimum thresholds would trigger a number of actions and if wells go dry, Self-Help Enterprises would provide a rapid response.

That program is already funded with a revolving \$3.5 million reserve, meaning more money will be put in as funds are spent, the Kern team explained.

Halting or slowing subsidence, or land sinking, was also still an issue.

In what could become a showdown with Kern County’s other main economic driver – oil production – Water Board staff wanted the new groundwater plans to quantify the causes behind subsidence, meaning who’s to blame.

That has become a ticklish issue on Kern’s western fringes where ag and oil are mixed and subsidence has crimped the California Aqueduct’s carrying capacity by more than 40%.

Water Board staff acknowledged that recent actions by the Westside Water District Authority to [ban groundwater pumping](#) for a 2.5 mile-zone around the aqueduct, were a good first step.

Kern’s consultants noted that while there has been greater subsidence in western Kern County and along the Tulare County border, the majority of subsidence in the subbasin has been less than one foot since 2015.

Kern has also committed \$40 million to add capacity to the southern portion of the Friant-Kern Canal, which had to be rebuilt along a 33-mile stretch north of Kern because it had sunk so much that its carrying capacity was cut by 60%.

“Kern has been very cooperative and transparent, which has been a welcome change compared to the Tule subbasin,” said Katie Duncan, senior water resources engineer for Friant Water Authority.

She referred to the subbasin just north of Kern County, which was [put on probation](#) last September by the Water Board.

The Tulare Lake subbasin, which covers most of Kings County, was put on probation in April 2024. But sanctions, including mandatory well meters, registration and fees, are on hold in Kings County pending the outcome of a lawsuit.