

Gaining from the rain

San Joaquin County program is designed

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When it rains, it pours. And water runs off everywhere.

When it's dry, we search high and low for water. Inevitably, we dip far below the surface and draw from an overtaxed underground aquifer.

In San Joaquin County, a history of pumping has depleted the supply and allowed for a relentless eastward march of intruding salt water.

The steady growth of California's population has created a "situation critical" for the groundwater supply.

Fortunately, water managers have found better ways of restoring depleted aquifers. They're learning how to effectively recharge nature's water bank.

The folks at the Stockton East Water District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have been paying attention. They've formed a partnership and created the Farmington Groundwater Recharge Program.

Every county resident, city dweller and rural-property owner should be watching what they're doing.

It's a \$33.3 million project (\$25 million from the federal government) that attempts to flood farm fields with up to 35,000 acre-feet of surplus water each year. Initially, the program seeks to lease up to 25 parcels totaling 1,200 acres. So far, seven sites totaling 500 acres have been identified in an area east of Stockton and Lodi.

"Our job is to make sure groundwater is available, no matter how San Joaquin County grows," said Kevin Kauffman, general manager at Stockton East.

Kauffman's agency and the Army Corps have successfully tested the flooded-field recharge approach. Feasibility is no longer an issue. They're ready to expand.

The effort is economical and most effective during wet winter months.

Selling it to skeptical farmers is the obstacle. Wise landowners will seize this opportunity. Ideally, applicants will own 20 acres or more of porous land.

"This is what we'd love to hear," said Patrick Dwyer of the Army Corps of Engineers. "I've got a plot that I can't grow on, because the more water I use, the more it wants. It just soaks in.' "

If the parcel is located near a flowing water source -- Bear Creek, Mormon Slough or the Mokelumne River -- so much the better.

Those landowners who are willing to participate would receive \$300 per acre yearly for the renting of their land. The recharge program will take the property out of crop production for at least a half a year.

No one in California has a totally reliable source of water. Since its early days, the state has experienced boom or bust while trying to slake its thirst.

The Farmington project is a valuable effort that takes advantage of wet years to get ready for dry years. It holds the line on saline intrusion and replenishes a valuable, if hidden, water supply.

It's been a generation since Californians did anything new about above-ground water storage. Our future depends on a fresh, free-flowing aquifer.