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SJ water table to get boost

By BOB WHITE
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FARMINGTON -- A plan is afoot to flood about 1,200 acres of farmland in selected areas of eastern San Joaquin County to replenish the dwindling underground water supply.

A secondary benefit will be creation of new habitat for ducks, geese and other migratory waterfowl.

Farmland flooding is expected to begin in early 2004, with the federal government picking up most of the \$33.5 million cost of the project.

The county Farm Bureau will hold a meeting Wednesday in Stockton, where officials from the Army Corps of Engineers and Stockton East Water District will explain the project to farmers.

For growers like Grant Thompson, who farms almost 800 acres on Jack Tone Road about 10 miles north of Ripon, raising the water table under his farm can happen none too soon.

It's a matter of dollars and cents to Thompson. The deeper he has to go to pump irrigation water, the more it costs.

It is so expensive to pump water from a depth of 120 to 140 feet that he has no complaints about the \$24 per acre-foot he pays the Central San Joaquin Water Conservation District for surface water to meet some of his irrigation needs.

By comparison, the Modesto Irrigation District this year is charging farmers \$15.30 per acre for up to 3.5 acre-feet of water. That works out to less than \$5 per acre-foot.

An acre-foot of water is the amount it would take to cover one acre, roughly the size of a football field, to a depth of one foot.

One reason Thompson can't complain about the cost of water from the conservation district is that he is chairman of the conservation district board, which set the price.

Another reason, however, is that in the seven years the district has been supplying farmers with some of their water, the underground water table has risen 12 feet because of reduced pumping.

"In seven years," Thompson added, "I have recouped the cost of buying water by not having to pay the cost of pumping that amount from underground."

He said he is convinced the plan to recharge the water basin by flooding acreage in various areas will work, based on the results from a monitoring well placed on his property as part of a feasibility study.

"This area is sandy," Thompson said, "and water percolates very quickly."

The Stockton East Water District and Army Corps of Engineers were the driving forces behind the recharge study and what has come to be called the Farmington Groundwater Recharge Program.

Stockton East is interested in recharging the water basin under eastern San Joaquin County for two reasons, according to General Manager Kevin Kauffman:

The water district includes 75,000 acres of farmland, 80 percent of which relies on water pumped from the basin.

The district provides domestic water to much of Stockton. As the basin shrinks, saline water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta intrudes farther east. So far, it has forced the shutdown of three domestic-water wells in Stockton.

Kauffman said the plan initially is to persuade about 25 farmers to lease 45 to 50 acres each to be flooded, some just during the winter months, some year-round, depending on available water.

About 35,000 acre-feet of water from various sources is available for the project, he said.

If the project is as successful as corps and consulting engineers hope, it could be expanded.

A water management plan completed by the county indicates that between 170,000 and 220,000 acre-feet of recharge water will be required annually to prevent salt intrusion into the basin, Kauffman said.

Wednesday's open house will be from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Farm Bureau office, 3290 N. Ad Art Way, Stockton.

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