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Rows of corn begin to sprout at the Nakagawa property near the Mokelumne River in Acampo. A recharge project is proposed at the location in September after the crop is harvested. ([Jennifer M. Howell](#)/News-Sentinel)

Lodi's groundwater supply steadily dropping

By [Ross Farrow](#)/News-Sentinel Staff Writer

John Kautz has 25 acres of weed-infested dirt in Victor that once grew winegrapes.

He has new plans for that land -- to help replenish eastern San Joaquin County's rapidly depleting water table.

Pending a successful tax election this week to finance the project, Kautz will use his land to be flooded with 18 inches of water.

The idea is for the water to seep underground and quench the earth's thirst.

Kautz said he has offered his property at the southwest corner of Victor and Locust Tree roads for a couple of years to see what kind of groundwater storage project will work.

"This is strictly a test plot," Kautz said. "We want to try a number of things to determine what the soil intake will be.

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We have to identify what's been taking place."

Northern and eastern San Joaquin County has a continually diminishing water table, both in terms of the amount of water it has and the quality of that water.

But due to competing interests in the county, little has been done over the past 100 years to replenish the ground with water after it's been used for domestic or agricultural purposes.

In recent years, some say, the switch by many farmers from flood irrigation to drip irrigation has made problems worse.

Small efforts to replenish the groundwater basin are either planned or underway. One such effort is for the North San Joaquin Water Conservation District to flood two parcels. One of them is Kautz's parcel in Victor, and the other is on 20 acres owned by the Nakagawa family in Acampo.



Ed Steffani, manager of the North San Joaquin Water Conservation District, talks on the phone about irrigation as he visits a recharge site on the Nakagawa property. (Jennifer M. Howell/News-Sentinel)

Water experts commonly refer to the need to "recharge" the area's water supply. In water circles, "recharge" isn't an electrical term. It's more for replenishing the earth with additional water.

The county's water table diminishes about a foot per year because more water is used for urban and agricultural purposes than the amount that seeps into the ground from rainfall and snow melt.

"It's like a checking account -- if you spend more money than you put in, you have overdraft," said William R. Swanson, a water consultant with Montgomery Watson Harza in Sacramento who is organizing the Farmington Recharge project for Stockton East.

Since 1951, the water table has dropped about 55 feet along Highway 99 in the Kettleman Lane-Harney Road area. The drop has been more pronounced to the east -- about 100 feet at Harney Lane and Jack Tone Road. A similar amount of water has dropped at Kettleman and Highway 88.

California uses 1.3 million acre-feet of groundwater more than is replenished into the ground, according to the Water Education Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in

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Sacramento.

The quality and quantity of groundwater -- water that seeps through the earth's surface -- is critical for areas that do not have state-allocated rights to water from California's rivers.

That includes the Lodi area, which extends east to areas like Lockeford and Clements.

Restoring an unseen source

As groundwater gets deeper and deeper beneath the ground's surface, the more expensive it is for water users to pump it out of wells for urban or agricultural uses.

In extreme cases, such as the Mojave Desert and Antelope Valley in Southern California, groundwater overdraft has caused the soil to sink and fracture.

Groundwater basins can be replenished in a number of ways, including drilling holes into the ground, pouring water onto a field and letting it seep and building small dams on local rivers and creeks to keep water from flowing downstream.

"What you need to do is attack the problem from numerous fronts," Swanson said.

Eastern San Joaquin County water districts are attempting two such plans of attack.



An egret stands among furrows that help promote percolation in recharging the groundwater supply at the Stockton East Water District Water Treatment Plant. (Jennifer M. Howell/News-Sentinel)

The North San Joaquin district plans an ambitious recharge project to replenish its water supply, but it will take the willingness of property owners within the district to pony up \$1 per acre annually.

The fee would give the water district revenue to pump Mokelumne River water through separate pipelines to the Kautz and Nakagawa properties.

The district is entitled by the state to collect 20,000 acre-feet from the Mokelumne River during rainy years. However, the district needs money to pay for pipe, to rent and prepare the

land for recharge, and to pay for power costs and overhead expenses.

If voters approve the ballot measure, North San Joaquin will pump water from the Mokelumne River through an underground pipeline to two locations. Steffani says the fee would generate \$50,000 per year to the district recharge program.

One is Kautz's 25-acre lot at the southwest corner of Victor and Locust Tree roads in Victor. The other is 20 acres owned by the Nakagawa family off Dustin Road, between Woodbridge Road and the Mokelumne River.

The North San Joaquin district, which covers about the eastern two-thirds of Lodi, parts of Acampo, Victor and areas south of Lockeford.

The ballot measure would actually allow up to \$5 per acre to be assessed, but state law would keep the tax at \$1 per acre until usage exceeds 5,000 acre-feet of Mokelumne River water per year.

To charge the full \$5 per year, the district would have to use 12,000 acre-feet of river water annually.

If approved, the tax will be included in property tax payments due Dec. 10. A simple majority is required.

Each homeowner with less than an acre gets one vote, while those owning more than 1 acre get one vote per acre. The charge would not be assessed on vacant property and non-irrigated farmland.

The water district mailed ballots to property owners in late May. Although some property owners have already voted, election day is actually Thursday.

A second recharge project

It's called the Farmington Water Recharge Program, but it's a project that involves Victor, Lockeford and Acampo as well.

The Stockton East Water District hopes to begin demonstration tests early next year, where the district will flood all or parts of farms east of Highway 99.

The target area extends east generally to Jack Tone Road, all the way from Farmington to the Sacramento County line.

The idea is to saturate the ground with water to slowly raise the basin and fill the wells, said Swanson, the consultant administering the Farmington program with Stockton East and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The basin needs about 220,000 acre-feet per year, but that isn't a realistic number, Swanson said. The Farmington project's goal, he said, is to add 35,000 acre-feet into the basin.

"That's not going to fill the hole, but it will bring the hole to acceptable levels," Swanson said.

Stockton East officials hope to entice at least some farmers into either selling, leasing or granting an easement to the water district.

That would allow their land to be flooded year long or during parts of the year when crops aren't being grown, Swanson said.

Stockton East General Manager Kevin Kauffman said he would like to talk to landowners about their property during July or August. Property owners will not be forced to participate, Kauffman said.



**Kevin
Kauffman**

Each property will be analyzed on an individual basis because they all have individual characteristics, such as topography and soil type, Swanson said. If Stockton East is interested in using a particular piece of property, the agency will negotiate a price with the property owner, he said.

The flooding would result in water saturating into the ground, raising the water table and making it easier and less costly to pump water from wells.

Drip irrigation a hindrance?

Andy Christensen, manager of Woodbridge Irrigation District, says his district is contributing to the groundwater basin's recharge in an indirect way by selling surplus water to the city of Lodi, but Steffani contends that Woodbridge isn't contributing at all to help the groundwater table.

The Woodbridge district, which serves 13,000 agricultural customers in Woodbridge, southwestern Acampo, west Lodi and Thornton, recently agreed to sell Lodi 6,000 acre-feet per year for \$1.2 million.

Woodbridge has the available water because the district established a drip irrigation program for its farmers five years ago, said Woodbridge manager Andy Christensen.

Steffani contends that Woodbridge-area farmers previously used more than 3 acre-feet per year to irrigate their crops, with about 2 of the 3 feet being absorbed into the groundwater basin. Using drip irrigation, Woodbridge Irrigation District customers use only the 1 acre-foot, with no other water being used to replenish the basin.

Christensen declined to comment on Steffani's assertion. He said that by selling water to Lodi, Woodbridge is keeping the water in the county, and the north part of the county at that.

Rich Prima, Lodi's public works director, said that the City Council has yet to decide whether to provide the Mokelumne River water it acquires from Woodbridge directly to residential and business customers, or to add it to the groundwater basin.

The city will conduct a study to determine the best use for Lodi's new water.

If strong steps are taken, Lodi might see a sharp rise in the area basin. That's apparently happened in Stockton, where the water table has risen significantly over the past 20 years because of their acquisition of Stanislaus River water from New Melones Reservoir.

In fact, the groundwater level in Stockton has increased about 20 feet in the past 10 years, said Mark Murphy, the city of Stockton's municipal utilities director.

A public hearing is scheduled for 7 p.m. Thursday at Kirst Hall at Hutchins Street Square, 125 S. Hutchins St., Lodi, regarding North San Joaquin's recharge proposal. Votes may be cast after the hearing that night.

The North San Joaquin board of directors will tabulate the ballots and announce the outcome of the election that night.

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