



# EXCHANGE

## perspective

2024  
Q4 Newsletter

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An informational newsletter for water users and landowners in the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors' service area.

## A Recap of This Water Year

By: Chris White, Executive Director

**A**s 2024 comes to a close, I want to take a moment to recap the recent water years we have had and look ahead to what 2025 has in store for us.

2023 was a tremendous wet year throughout California that filled up our reservoirs and provided maximum carryover storage for the 2024 water season. Though we entered the year in a strong position, 2024 was only an average water year, particularly in the Shasta Watershed.

Last year was a non-critical year for our water supply and we are optimistic that 2025 will be the same. The current projections from the Department of Water Resources show an estimated 4.3 million acre-feet (AF) of inflows into Shasta, well above the 3.2 million AF threshold to qualify as a non-critical year. With that said, there is still plenty of time left in the year and forecasts can change quickly in California. We will be much more confident once we receive updated projections in February.

Our west side neighbors, however, dealt with significantly reduced allocations that gradually increased throughout the year from an initial February allocation of 15% to a 50% allocation in June. This was the result of major operational uncertainties in the water system resulting from regulations and court orders already in place. The result, however, was an inability to properly plan for the growing season, with additional certainty for their water deliveries coming only after it was too late to be of real use.



*Signing the Memorandum of Understanding for the South of Delta Comprehensive Drought Plan alongside Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton and our partners at Friant Water Authority & San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority*

While early 2025 season projections look favorable for our allocations, we are hopeful that our neighbors also receive early reliable allocations this year too. This ever-increasing uncertainty overhanging our water supplies, impacted by new operations plans, new biological opinions and voluntary agreements, is why we continue to push forward multiple new projects to capture and store more water and prepare for future dry years.

This year, we finalized an agreement for the South of Delta Comprehensive Drought Plan and began work on a pilot project with our partners at Friant Water Authority, San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, and the US Bureau of Reclamation. As a result, we were able to jointly store 82.5 thousand Acre-Feet of water to be available during the next drought. Our 2025 extension of this pilot project will build upon the progress we made this year while improving operations and looking at additional storage options for future use.

Over the summer, we participated in a signing ceremony for a \$16 million grant for the Los Banos Creek Recharge and Recovery Project, which will begin Phase 1 of development in early 2025.

Additionally, this year CCID and Del Puerto Water District neared completion of the Orestimba Creek Recharge and Recovery Project, aided by an additional \$1 million grant this year to complete construction. We continue to push forward the Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir Project and are making good progress in the design of the project.

To maintain reliable water supplies, we know that we need to keep pushing forward these projects and others like them, while working collaboratively with our local, state, and federal partners and providing continued support for disadvantaged communities in our own backyard. California's water system is not a winner-take-all contest, rather we all benefit through collaboration, strategic planning, and long-term investments. We look forward to building on the progress we have made in the coming year.

# Update on SGMA Compliance

In 2014, California passed the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) to ensure that groundwater is managed responsibly throughout the state. Under SGMA, local Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) are required to develop and implement Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs), which are essentially roadmaps for how groundwater basins will reach long-term sustainability.

The Exchange Contractors are part of the Delta-Mendota Subbasin, a critical region within California's San Joaquin Valley, covering about 765,000 acres across parts of San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Fresno, Madera, and San Benito counties. The subbasin is home to over a dozen communities, many of which rely on groundwater for drinking, farming, and supporting natural habitats.

In 2023, the state determined that the initial plan for the Delta-Mendota subbasin was inadequate and should be re-worked. Since then, the 23 Delta-Mendota GSAs have worked collaboratively to create a new, unified plan that focuses on a coordinated approach to managing water levels and reducing groundwater overdraft. The new plan addresses areas that the state deemed needed improvement and has been submitted as early as possible to provide time for ample review and outreach to the public.

Key improvements in the new plan include:

- **Unified Groundwater Management:** The original plan was a combination of six separate management plans submitted together, which resulted in a lack of overall cohesion. The new plan was developed between all parties involved to ensure consistency and coordinated water management across the subbasin.
- **Groundwater Levels:** The subbasin is committed to keeping groundwater levels at or above where they were in 2015, which helps prevent wells from running dry.
- **Water Quality:** The subbasin has also set targets to protect water quality, ensuring that groundwater stays safe for drinking and farming. Specific contaminants, such as nitrates and arsenic, are closely monitored to avoid harmful impacts.
- **Subsidence:** Over-pumping can cause the land to sink (subsidence). The subbasin is working to eliminate subsidence by 2040, with a plan in place to reduce pumping in areas most at risk.
- **Ensuring Families Have Drinking Water:** Groundwater is a lifeline for many communities in the subbasin. The GSAs are committed to making sure families and farms continue to have access to clean, safe water. They have put policies in place to protect drinking water, including a program to mitigate the impact on domestic wells if groundwater levels fall too low. This includes providing bottled water and replacing wells when necessary.

The DM Subbasin is working towards sustainability by reducing groundwater pumping and improving water management practices. The goal is to ensure that groundwater remains a reliable resource for generations to come.

The updated plan will be reviewed by the state in 2025, and the subbasin will continue to adapt and improve its approach as needed. There will be a public hearing in the second quarter of next year, and we are working closely with stakeholders and state board staff to inform them of the changes that have been made in response to their original findings. We are optimistic that our early submission of the revised GSP and outreach efforts will support the approval of the plan.

## Community Infrastructure Grants

For decades, the San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Water Authority has worked hand in hand with local communities, facing head-on some of the most pressing challenges in the Central Valley. From ensuring access to water in a region that knows all too well the importance of this resource, to managing flood control and developing critical infrastructure, our mission has supported the people who call this region home.

This year, we took another step forward in that mission by launching the **Community Infrastructure Fund**, a new initiative designed to help local communities move their most important projects forward. But this fund isn't just about infrastructure—it's about investing in the fabric of our communities, enhancing quality of life, and building a stronger, more resilient Central Valley.

We're proud to announce that the first cohort of well-deserving recipients have already been awarded. With more than \$500,000 in grants, five local projects will help shape the future of our region. These projects aren't just physical improvements—they are investments in our people, our shared spaces, and the opportunities we want to provide for future generations.

Take the City of Firebaugh, for example. This year, they were awarded the largest grant—\$180,000—to revitalize the **San Joaquin River Pedestrian and Bike Trail**. This trail, which runs

alongside the Poso Canal and the San Joaquin River, has long been a place where families gather, children ride their bikes, and individuals enjoy the outdoors. By rehabilitating 7,000 linear feet of the existing trail, Firebaugh is not only creating more recreational opportunities for its residents but is also investing in the health and well-being of its community. We're proud to be a part of that.

The City of Newman's project tells another powerful story of how these funds are being put to work. With a \$150,000 grant, they are creating a **Community Conservation Area at the Newman Nature Park**. But this isn't just about a park—it's about education, sustainability, and community connection. Newman will install an educational plaza, a pollinator garden to teach about the importance of biodiversity, and a nature-themed fitness course to encourage outdoor activity. This project blends recreation with learning and brings people closer to the land they live on.

In Los Banos, our support is making their **HG Fawcett Canalside Trail** safer and more accessible by helping the city install solar lighting along the trail with a \$125,000 grant. It's a step that not only brightens up the area—quite literally—but also reflects a commitment to sustainable energy and improving the community's public spaces.

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# Hosting the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation

**M**any of the most pressing issues we face in the Central Valley—from the need to capture, store and maximize the water we have, to the need for further innovation and sustainability efforts—will require sustained work for generations to come.

All around us are examples of businesses, water agencies and individual leaders that are making great strides, but we know that it is critical that we prepare the next generation to continue the progress that is being made today.

The San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors were proud to once again host a cohort from California Agricultural Leadership Foundation (CALF), an advanced leadership development program that I consider one of the premier opportunities for rising leaders in the agricultural industry.

We spent two days touring crucial infrastructure projects that demonstrate both the current challenges and the innovative solutions being implemented in water management. Joe Del Bosque and Case and Darcy Vlot shared creative on-farm solutions and leadership lessons learned, and Ric Ortega arranged for an informative wildlife refuge tour and an informative overview of the wildlife management areas.

Sites like the Los Banos Detention Dam, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge and Mendota Dam provided concrete examples of our strategies for water conservation and habitat restoration—essential for sustainable agricultural practices.

At Mendota Dam, we discussed the San Joaquin River Restoration Program, both in terms of the collaboration that has led to this point and the ongoing challenges that exist. The use of modern technology to protect fish populations while ensuring that farms continue to receive the water they need served as a great example of a win-win solution.

At the same time, we know that ongoing regulatory and funding challenges will need to be addressed moving forward. However,

it is a clear demonstration of how we're working to balance ecological health with agricultural sustainability.

On the second day, we explored broader infrastructure efforts including the C.W. Bill Jones Pumping Plant and the Tracy Fish Facility, which are integral to managing the region's water and protecting endangered species.

The tour included a detailed look at the Del Puerto Canyon Reservoir Project, which our organization is proud to be involved in along with our partner agency, Del Puerto Water District. Once finished, the project will store up to 82,000 acre-feet of water in the 800-acre reservoir, improving water reliability and flood management in the area.

The tour concluded at San Luis Reservoir, where we revisited the remarks delivered by President Kennedy at the dedication of the facility and learned about modernization efforts, including a seismic retrofit of the Sisk Dam and a dam raise for more needed storage and secure water supplies.

We were particularly excited to be joined by Assemblymember Esmeralda Soria, and Merced County Supervisors Daron McDaniel and Scott Silveira. We appreciate them sharing valuable insights about the role of government in these important projects and initiatives and for taking the time to engage with the fellows. Their participation highlighted the importance of collaboration in advancing these large-scale initiatives.

The challenges we face in the Central Valley are numerous, from water scarcity to the balance of ecological and agricultural needs, but they are not insurmountable. By guiding the next generation through the intricacies of these challenges, showcasing real-world solutions and fostering direct dialogues with leaders and policymakers, we do more than just prepare them. We inspire confidence and readiness to take the reins.

After getting to spend time with this next generation of agricultural leaders, I am more optimistic than ever about the future of our industry and the Central Valley.



*Hosting a cohort from the 2024 Ag Leadership Foundation*



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## Year-End Legislative Recap

**W**ater rights took center stage in 2023 with several bills continuing into 2024 that targeted illegal diversions, curtailments, and water rights.

Two important bills that we opposed last year either failed to pass or were significantly amended during the legislative session of 2024. AB 460, which originally would have provided the State Water Board overly broad rights to curtail water rights and impose penalties, was significantly amended to drop the enforcement authority and signed by the Governor. AB 1337, which would have authorized the Water Board to curtail diversions, even those held by senior water rights holders, failed to pass after strong opposition from the water community, which organized around the issue and significantly impacted the outcome.

Before departing on their summer break in July, the Legislature placed a Resources Bond on the ballot, which passed in the November election. The \$10 billion bond measure contained funding for a variety of resource related items including water storage, groundwater storage, conjunctive use, and flood control. It also contained funding for clean water, storm water run-off as well as a host of non-water related items. Water managers would have liked to see more money set aside for storage projects within the bond to support the development of critical infrastructure and storage projects throughout the state, but the bond had to be capped at \$10 billion to allow for a separate \$10 billion school construction bond to also be placed on the ballot.

## Community Infrastructure Grants continued from page 2

The City of Gustine received two grants for projects that go straight to the heart of long-term sustainability. One is a \$95,000 investment to **convert the Borrelli Basin detention pond into a Groundwater Recharge Facility**, addressing critical issues like flood mitigation and drought preparation. The second, a \$30,000 grant, will help aerate **Schmidt Park Pond**, improving water quality and ensuring the pond remains a vibrant community space.

When we launched this fund back in June, we invited proposals that could make a significant impact in areas ranging from water resource development to renewable resources and infrastructure.

Every project reflects a deep commitment to the community, a desire to improve the lives of residents, and a forward-thinking approach to the challenges of tomorrow.

The Community Infrastructure Fund will continue to be a cornerstone of our commitment to the Central Valley. We believe in putting our resources to work—not just for infrastructure, but for people. After all, the work we do today isn't just about dams and canals; it's about building a more resilient and sustainable region. We're excited to see these projects come to life and to watch our communities grow stronger as a result.