

BLOG: Drought conversation will turn to dreaded groundwater rules

Posted by Mark Grossi on February 13, 2014 Updated 5 hours ago

A west San Joaquin Valley farmer told me Wednesday he would pay \$1,000 an acre-foot for as much water as he could get. But he can't find any.

In Kern County, a water auction last week attracted a top price of \$1,350 per acre-foot. In many places, that's 10 times the usual cost. It's desperation time in this historic drought.

If there's no river water, people turn on their wells. If everybody pumps at the same time, wells will go dry, land will sink and neighbor will be upset with neighbor.

We will wind up in a serious discussion about government rules for folks using wells. That's a subject usually whispered about in farm country.

Groundwater is basically the go-to resource in droughts, and few farmers like the idea of government regulating it. California and Texas are the only two states in the West that don't have comprehensive groundwater regulation.

But groundwater is what this drought will come down to.

If you own the property above groundwater, you have the right to pump it out and use it in a "beneficial" way, such as irrigating crops.

Who could blame a farmer who pumps water day and night save investments in almonds, pistachios, citrus, vines and other crops? Farmers all over the Valley will do it. The Valley is the epicenter of a \$44 billion state agricultural economy.

But as one west-sider told me this week: "I hope the California Aqueduct doesn't sink too much this year."

The ground beneath our feet sinks naturally -- we're in a 25,000-square-mile bowl with sediment going down thousands of feet -- but pumping water speeds it up. Canals that rely on gravity to move water will not work the same if the ground sinks too far.

I won't even guess at the repair cost for the monstrous California Aqueduct, but it is not the only problem.

After the 2009 dry year in Kern County -- where groundwater banking is a way of life -- lawsuits were filed against the major corporations controlling the Kern Water Bank.

The suits alleged pumping at the bank dried up wells around neighboring homes. People lost their homes in Kern County during that dry time. This dry time is worse.

Earlier this month, activists sued more than a dozen farmers in Stanislaus County, angling to shut down 60 recently approved wells. The law suit is seeking a review of the impacts the wells will have on the county's underground water.

Legal action over groundwater is not new, nor is it unusual. But after this summer, it may become more frequent.

Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/13/3767632/drought-conversation-will-turn.html#storylink=cpy>