

# Effort to halt MID water rate hike falling short

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To cancel a proposed water rate hike, 1,476 Modesto Irrigation District customers would have to protest by today's deadline.

As of last week, opponents were 1,464 protests short of that mark.

The increase would boost farmers' water rates by 10 percent, to \$32.50 per acre. A separate proposal, also to be considered today by the MID board, would impose a drought surcharge of \$11.91 per acre for at least this year.

Other agenda items include a "facilities maintenance" increase, paid by customers who don't take water but want to reserve the right to do so in future years, to \$16.25 per acre, and formalizing the board's plan to pay \$400 per acre to 58 customers who agreed not to take water this year in the district's "allocation return program."

Under California's Proposition 218 rules, rate increases can be killed if half of a utility's customers protest, but that rarely happens. The MID sent notices of the proposal to 2,950 customers; only 12 had responded as of Wednesday.

Most board members have seemed to accept the idea of raising water prices. In other contexts, critics have accused the board of charging farmers far less than the water is worth and making up the difference by forcing electricity customers to pay more.

A third dry winter has reduced allotments to 24 inches per acre this year, compared with the historic average of 42 inches.

Farmers last year received 36 inches per acre, paying \$9.83 an acre-foot. If the increase and drought surcharge are approved, customers this year would pay \$22.21 per acre-foot, figured at 24 inches per acre.

However, 58 farmers signed up to receive the "extra" water that others will be paid to forgo, and will get 8 inches more per acre at the price of \$200 per acre-foot – equal to the amount the district pays farmers giving up their allotments (\$400 per acre divided by 2 feet of water for each acre).

The drought surcharge will be dropped, officials say, when the drought ends.

The district has yet to finalize two other innovations for bringing more water to thirsty crops.

First, the board has agreed to let farmers buy and sell their shares of water on the open market, for any price they negotiate. The district, which won't get more money for accommodating such transfers, initially told participants to put in orders by May 1. But some farmers asked for a second or even third deadline later in the season, and a board majority last week indicated they will go along.

Second, the district hopes to buy from farmers groundwater pumped from private wells into canals.

The \$11.91-per-acre drought surcharge is to cover costs of extra pumping and ditch patrols this year.

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