

OID to consider plan to pay farmers to fallow pastures

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Plans to fallow more than 1,100 acres of Oakdale farmland so the water saved can be sold to out-of-county buyers for about \$1.6 million will be considered Tuesday by the Oakdale Irrigation District.

The proposed water sale could provide a financial windfall for some landowners, who could collect up to \$1.52 million in cash incentives and funds to improve their private properties.

Among those expected to participate is one farmer who is interested in idling 177 acres. That landowner could get paid a \$56,640 “cash incentive” for doing nothing with that land for one year, plus up to \$212,400 more to pay for “installation of approved conservation practices” on the property.

According to OID, 33 people who own 1,106 acres of primarily pastures have filed forms indicating interest in participating in the following program.

Nine of those landowners own 40 acres or more each – totaling 862 acres – which means they could collect the bulk of the proceeds from the public agency’s water sale.

OID’s report on its plan does not name the landowners who would benefit.

Additional landowners would be allowed to sign up for fallowing through Jan. 14.

The estimated 4,000 acre-feet of saved water would be sold for \$400 per acre-foot. Exactly who would buy the water has not been made public, but OID’s board has been negotiating behind closed doors with the Westlands Water District, the Stockton East Water District and other water contractors.

OID has been considering the following program for more than a year as a way to raise money for the district and its farmers.

According to OID, “The main objective of the program is to provide a revenue stream for landowners to help pay for conservation upgrades to their property.”

Farmers statewide are being urged to conserve water. In an effort to get farmers to use less, California lawmakers passed the Water Conservation Act of 2009. It requires irrigation districts to charge landowners based on how much water they use.

OID has been charging farmers a flat rate of \$19.50 a year per acre, no matter how much water they use. This year, OID will charge a flat rate of \$27 per acre, but next year, it will start phasing in volumetric charges based on how much water is consumed.

That could boost farming costs unless conservation steps are taken.

“We all have to get better at the business of managing water on our lands,” said Steve Knell, OID’s general manager. “The state of California requires this and has passed legislation to make it so. The problem is the state is providing no money to help get us there. We either pay for it out of our own pocket or find innovative and adaptive programs to bring money into our area to help pay for these costly improvements. That’s what OID is trying to do.”

Among the conservation projects that could qualify for funding as part of the following program would be “land conversions from high water use crops to lower water use crops.” Laser land leveling, reseeding and new irrigation

pipelines also could qualify.

So the money from the public agency's water sales could be used to convert privately owned pastures into almond orchards with microdrip or microsprinkler systems because such orchards use less water than pastures.

OID's fallowing proposal has sparked controversy because it would export water out of Stanislaus County. Some farmers near OID's borders want to be allowed to buy the district's water instead, which they contend would reduce their need to pump groundwater from Stanislaus' aquifers.

Some cattle ranchers also have expressed concern about fallowing Oakdale pastures because it could reduce their grazing options.

OID's board of directors will meet at 9 a.m. Tuesday in the district boardroom, 1205 E. F St., Oakdale.

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