

# Historic Merced County groundwater ordinance up for adoption Tuesday

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The Board of Supervisors is expected to adopt Merced County's historic groundwater ordinance on Tuesday, with some in the community waiting to see if the board will delay the process again.

The groundwater ordinance, which has been under review since May, was near adoption in December. But county supervisors [took no action](#) because of several "last-minute" comment letters received by concerned parties.

Those letters made revision suggestions to the proposed ordinance, prompting the board to send it back for review.

The ordinance is the first of its kind for Merced County. It would regulate groundwater transfers outside county basins through a permitting process, allowing county officials to scrutinize each project to determine potential impacts on groundwater resources.

It would also require people who want to build a new well, those who want to export water from existing wells or those who want to increase pumping activities to apply for a permit.

New well owners would be required to install a metering device to report water usage to the county. An online self-reporting tool is being created to make the process easier for residents, county administrators said. Reporting water usage will soon be a requirement for all water wells under new state legislation.

Outrage over a large groundwater sale amid a record drought pushed the county to discuss groundwater regulations.

As farmers laid off employees and idled their land because of water shortages, two local landowners, Steve Sloan and Steve Smith, proposed selling groundwater to two water agencies in Stanislaus County for profit.

The county had no restrictions on exporting groundwater, unlike neighboring Fresno, Madera, Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties.

The county hired multiple water experts and attorneys, and formed a committee to help draft the groundwater regulations. After a lengthy process, a decision on the ordinance is expected by county supervisors this week.

Longtime farmer Bob Weimer has been part of the discussions from the beginning. He said a lot has been accomplished, even though the ordinance may require changes in the face of new state water legislation.

"We've finally come to a place where we have something to work with," Weimer said Friday. "As it's been said by the Board of Supervisors, it's a work in progress and it will continue to evolve. But this gives us the foundation to deal with exports out of the area."

Weimer said he's hopeful last-minute comments or letters won't stop the ordinance from being adopted.

"You never know what's going to come out of the woodwork at this late stage," he said. "Are there advocates waiting for the last moment to come waltzing in and threaten legal action to try to disrupt this particular work? I don't know. I don't know what to expect, but I'm hopeful."

If the supervisors adopt the ordinance Tuesday, it would go into effect 30 days later. Those who are currently exporting water outside the county's basins – including Sloan and Smith – would be required to apply for a permit.

The Board of Supervisors will meet at 10 a.m. Tuesday in the board's chamber on the third floor of the Merced County Administration Building, 2222 M St.

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