

# California's drought spurs unexpected effect: Eco-friendly development

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The drought in California has gone on so long, and is so severe, that it's beginning to change the way people are designing residential communities — in unexpected ways, and unexpected places.

Planning is under way, for instance, for one of the first eco-friendly communities in California's predominantly agricultural Central Valley.

The site is in the town of Reedley, 30 miles southeast of Fresno.

There were a number of factors that distinguished Reedley, says Curt Johansen, the San Francisco developer who's spearheading the project.

It's home to a community college and a thriving downtown, and it recently said no to Wal-Mart building in the town.

"Reedley had just updated their general plan," Johansen says. "So I thought, OK, if ever I'm going to try this, let me try this."

On a recent day, we're touring the proposed site of what Johansen calls [Kings River Village](#). It sits near the edge of town and has a view of the Sierra Nevada. Modern-looking low-income housing sits on one side, and a sports park on the other.

But the site itself sits on 40 acres of what used to be peach and plum trees.

"When you first arrive, you're looking at very walkable retail with office-above components. So something you might see more in an urban, bigger city," Johansen says.

He's talking about smaller homes built close to each other with a common green space. That's unusual for cities in the Central Valley, which are dominated by older homes and basic tract houses. Kings River Village, in this city of 26,000, is different from Johansen's past multi-million-dollar projects in Southern California and the Bay Area.

"Embedding principles into everything I did became far more important to me than the fanciest Italian marble in the bathroom," Johansen says.

Nicole Zieba is the Reedley city manager behind the project. "I can feel good about knowing that ... the developer was really concentrating on providing an environmentally responsible place for people to live," she says.

This development is a big deal for a farm town in California. It will run on solar power and will feature small, drought-resistant yards in line with new state regulations.

There will also be a system for treating and sending wastewater back into the aquifer underneath the city. Zieba says the amount of water returned to the aquifer could be surprising.

"What we found as we did a little delving into some of the studies was that the orchards would use more water than what's envisioned to be used in this particular 40-acre development," she says.

Not everyone is convinced it will use less water. Phil Desatoff is with a local water district that is suing Reedley over

the development's environmental review. He's questioning whether the community will actually help restore the aquifer underneath the city.

"This project may use less water than most other projects you typically see, but we haven't seen anything that proves that they actually are going to use less water than the land that was there," Desatoff says.

He's not the only one questioning the project. Alex McDonald, of the University of California, Irvine, is project manager for [Team Orange County](#), a group studying drought-friendly housing models.

"The industry ... is trending toward this notion of net-zero," he says, referring to communities that produce as much energy as residents use.

A community could benefit the environment even more by generating even more energy than it uses. There's a lot more the Reedley project could do in this area, McDonald says.

And he says the city could push the envelope even more by using locally sourced, eco-friendly building materials.

Despite the backlash, Johansen, the developer of Kings River Village, believes that the environmentally conscious community is a win for the region, because change isn't always adopted so quickly in places like Reedley.

"It will actually have more of an impact, I think, in the Valley," Johansen says. "A Reedley could serve as an inspiration for a lot of the other cities to actually say we can demand better here."

The Reedley City Council [has approved the plan](#), and the project is under environmental review. Johansen hopes to break ground in 2016.

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