

The Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program

Increasingly frequent and intense droughts are adding to a long-term imbalance between water supply and demand in many of California's agricultural regions. Bringing groundwater basins into balance and agricultural production in line with water supplies will require significant acreage of irrigated farmland to be taken out of production in the coming decades. California communities are wrestling with this challenge as they work to implement the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), which sets a 2040/2042 target for transition to sustainable groundwater use.

Experts estimate 500,000 to 1,000,000 acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley alone may need to be fallowed or retired to balance groundwater supply and demand and address climate change-driven water scarcity. If unmanaged, fallowed or retired fields can emit dust and worsen air quality; host weeds and pests; and adversely impact agricultural economies, rural communities and ecosystems.

However, there is an alternative: **multibenefit land repurposing**, which is the practice of transitioning irrigated land to new uses that conserve water and deliver benefits to communities and ecosystems. With public funding, growers can be compensated for voluntarily transitioning formerly irrigated farmland to new uses, such as habitat corridors, parks, wildlife friendly groundwater recharge basins, and well-managed rangeland.

In 2021, California established the **Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program (MLRP)** with an initial \$50 million investment to reduce reliance on groundwater while providing community health, economic well-being, water supply, habitat,



renewable energy and climate benefits. In 2022, an additional \$40 million was allocated to MLRP.

Block grants for local entities

California's Department of Conservation administers MLRP, with support from Self-Help Enterprises, Environmental Defense Fund, and Environmental Incentives - jointly serving as the program's Statewide Support Entity. MLRP delivers block grants up to \$10 million to local entities, such as groundwater sustainability agencies and community groups, to support coordinated planning and implementation of land repurposing projects. Local organizations can use these block grants to collaboratively plan for land use transitions, cover land repurposing project costs, and provide incentive payments to growers who voluntarily participate. The Statewide Support Entity provides support and coordination to all block grantees.



In addition to block grants, the MLRP can provide grants directly to Tribes to plan and implement multibenefit agricultural land repurposing projects.

Creating benefits for people and nature

With funding from the state, local organizations have the flexibility to determine which land repurposing project types and durations make the most sense and will provide the greatest benefits to their communities. Projects funded by the MLRP must use less water than the previously irrigated cropland. Benefits of land repurposing projects can be permanent or maintained for a minimum of 10 years.

Examples of strategies and projects that may be funded by the program include:

- Creation or restoration of habitat such as pollinator habitat, wetland habitat, upland habitat and riparian habitat.
- Development of multibenefit groundwater recharge areas.
- Restoration of floodplains.
- Transition of irrigated land to dryland farming or non-irrigated rangeland.
- Transition to less water intensive crops, including those for native seed production.
- Planting of cover crops or conservation cover.
- Reestablishment of Tribal land uses.
- Implementation of Tribal cultural practices.
- Facilitation of renewable energy projects that have an overall net greenhouse gas reduction.
- Creation of parks or community recreation areas.

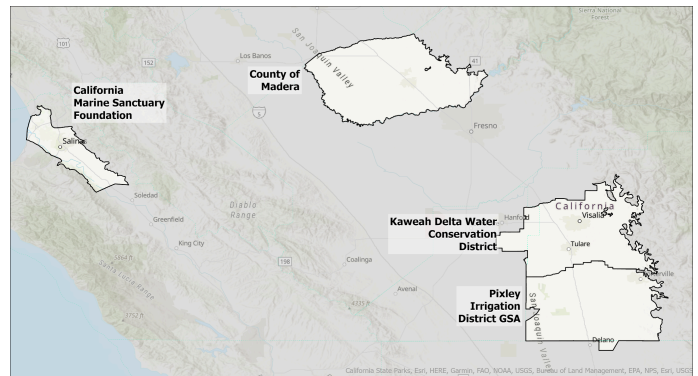
Supporting regional coordination

To ensure multibenefit land repurposing projects funded through MLRP are coordinated and prioritize the needs and preferences of local stakeholders, each block grantee is required to develop a multibenefit agricultural land repurposing plan. These plans outline the regional strategy to reduce reliance on groundwater while providing other benefits related to community health, economic well-being, water supply, flood resilience, habitat, renewable energy and/or

climate. Development of these plans will be informed by stakeholder input and coupled with outreach, education, and training.

Block grantees are also required to monitor repurposing projects to ensure defined conservation outcomes have been achieved and maintained for the agreed upon duration of the benefit.

In the first round of applications, the Department of Conservation awarded block grants to four agricultural regions facing significant water scarcity and agricultural transitions.



First-Round Block Grant Recipients

Kaweah Subbasin MLRP Program

The Kaweah Subbasin MLRP Program is committed to the selection and implementation of multibenefit projects that aim to reduce reliance on groundwater while supporting a viable agricultural economy and improving community and environmental health outcomes.

There will be a public solicitation for project proposals during the program. Projects may focus on the sustainable management of groundwater supplies, providing drought relief, restoring wildlife habitat, and providing other direct benefits to disadvantaged communities (DACs) and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFRs), while also protecting the Kaweah Subbasin's land-based economy. Projects will align with the broader MLRP Program goals as well as with regional land repurposing and Groundwater Sustainability Strategies in the Kaweah Subbasin.

A major component of the Kaweah MLRP Program focuses on outreach and engagement with communities and farmers in the Kaweah Subbasin to integrate their feedback into the program's development. Outreach and engagement efforts include meetings with diverse stakeholder groups, in-person campaigns to rural unincorporated DACs, targeted outreach to farmers and landowners, outdoor educational opportunities for youth, curriculum development that aims to educate youth in DACs on water issues, and opportunities for community members to engage in citizen science by monitoring nitrate for water quality in local households.

The outreach process is designed to build a better understanding of the challenges disadvantaged communities face and identify opportunities for this program to help address them. This program will also provide disadvantaged communities in the Kaweah subbasin resources to learn about land repurposing and groundwater sustainability, as well as water and air quality issues in the region.



Groundwater recharge project at Kaweah Oaks Preserve.

Our Partners

Kaweah Delta Water Conservation District
Greater Kaweah GSA
Mid-Kaweah GSA
East Kaweah GSA
Sequoia Riverlands Trust
Self-Help Enterprises
SocioEnvironmental Education Network
Valley Eco

Learn More and Get Involved

Stakeholders interested in learning more about the program or getting involved in land repurposing projects should reach out to info@kawahmlrp.org or visit www.kawahmlrp.org.

