California Agriculture Regulatory Update:

Water Supply, Nitrate and Salinity

April 2026

PREPARED BY:

LAND IQ

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Introduction

California agriculture continues to face regulations on water quality and quantity, and potentially on water rights. Growers, collectively represented by third parties, respond to expanded monitoring, reporting, and management requirements. This update focuses on activities between July 2025 and April 2026 related to water supply and quality regulations.

- **SGMA**
  groundwater basin management
- **ILRP**
  on-farm groundwater nitrate contamination prevention
- **CV-SALTS**
  salt and nitrate control
- **Bay-Delta Plan**
  surface water quality management

Sustainable Groundwater Management Act - SGMA

Background

California passed legislation to formally regulate groundwater in 2014. To this end, the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) assigned priority to each of California's 515 groundwater basins, based on factors such as groundwater pumping, population, and groundwater level history. Ninety-four groundwater basins were assigned high or medium priority. Together with adjudicated areas (where legal judgments negate the need for a GSP), the area represented by high and medium priority basins represents 98% of all pumping (20M ac-ft/year); 83% of the California's population (25M people) and 88% of irrigated land (6.7M ac).

Groundwater Sustainability Plans

California DWR empowered local agencies, called **Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs)**, within the 94 high and medium priority basins to plan how to balance their overdrafted groundwater basins by 2040. These plans, called **Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs)**, were submitted to DWR for approval in 2020 and 2022 depending on subbasin priority and overdraft status..

Status of Inadequate GSP Probationary Hearings

The State Water Resources Control Board was intervening in GSAs from five basins in the latter part of 2025, whose GSPs were classified as inadequate. Probation is the initial step in the direction of state-governed pumping if GSPs aren't revised to DWR's satisfaction within one year. During the probationary period, farmers must meter and register wells, pay pumping fees, and begin reporting extractions.

1. **Delta-Mendota** – A new single GSP (replacing the six original GSPs) was adopted by all 23 GSAs in the Subbasin in fall of 2024. The subbasin was returned to DWR oversight on April 7, 2026.
2. **Kaweah** – The State Water Board formally returned the Kaweah Subbasin to DWR on December 2, 2025 after finding that its GSAs addressed the key problems of subsidence, groundwater levels, and domestic well mitigation.
3. **Kern** – The Kern County Subbasin was returned to DWR jurisdiction by vote of the State Water Board in September, 2025. This subbasin is represented by 20 GSAs, who needed to show improved coordination to avoid continued probation status.
4. **Tulare Lake and Tule Subbasins** – Still designated as probationary.

Funding for GSP Implementation

The Sustainable Groundwater Management (SGM) Grant Program awarded several SGMA Implementation Grants to GSAs in Round 1 and Round 2. The Round 1 grants, totaling $152M, were awarded in 2022 and Round 2 grants, totaling $205M, were awarded in 2023.

A virtual workshop will be held on April 30, 2026, to provide an overview of the SGM Grant Program and the Watershed Resilience Grant Program. Proposition 4, a $10B Climate Resilience Bond, includes $200M for the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program and over $386M for groundwater recharge, storage, conjunctive use, and SGMA implementation.

Learn More

California Department of Water Resources
https://water.ca.gov/programs/groundwater-management/sgma-groundwater-management

Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program - ILRP

Background

The ILRP is a complex regulatory program with many components. Initially, its focus was on developing and implementing **Irrigation and Nitrogen Management Plan (INMP) Summary Reports in the Central Valley.** Farmers report on how much irrigation and nitrogen they are applying and submit this information to their water quality coalitions, who then summarize this information in a report to the Regional Water Quality Control Board. This information informs the overall strategy to manage nitrogen inputs to groundwater, which is an overarching program that everything else fits into called the **Management Practices Evaluation Program (MPEP)**.

Second Statewide Agricultural Expert Panel

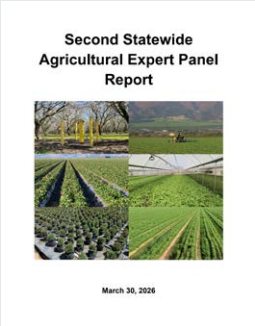
The ILRP program was, in part, based on recommendations from an agricultural expert panel convened in 2014 by the State Water Board. The Second Statewide Agricultural Expert Panel was convened in 2025 and directed to respond to several questions related to nitrogen regulation and critical data gaps in the N budget approach used for the ILRP to date. The 8-member Panel delivered their draft report on March 30, 2026, and a public review and comment period is open until April 30, 2026. Among their findings:

> *In some regions, sufficient data and tools are available to set long-term crop-specific targets/limits for nitrate discharge. Other regions need more time to collect and analyze data to assess groundwater risks from nitrate. Targets or limits should be addressed on a local or regional basis. The diversity of agricultural production systems in the state makes it impossible to impose a one-size-fits-all approach to the regulatory process.*

> *It makes more sense to set limits at the higher N discharge objectives, which are agronomically achievable by a high percentage of growers. Agronomically challenging A-R goals that are to be implemented in the future should be classified as targets to provide flexibility for growers to develop, experiment, and implement the necessary practices that will allow them to reach these more restrictive N discharge objectives.*

Additional research is needed to understand regional differences in N dynamics, and each region should have the flexibility to determine the best metric, model, or literature value.

The Panel considered alternative regulatory pathways for winegrapes, alfalfa, non-fertilized pastures, and nurseries; provided an extensive list of recommendations for effective irrigation and nitrogen management practices and needs for outreach, research, evaluation and implementation; and provided detailed information on the use of models to assess well nitrate contamination risks from agriculture.



The draft report is available here.

Learn More

California Department of Water Resources
www.waterboards.ca.gov/centralvalley/water_issues/irrigated_lands/ilrp_decision_tree.pdf

Central Valley Salinity Alternatives for Long-term Sustainability - CV-SALTS

Background

CV-SALTS is a collaborative initiative between industry, government, agriculture, and communities to address and control nitrate and salt accumulation in California water supplies. While the CV- SALTS salt control program is implemented at the Central Valley wide scale, the nitrate control program is administered by local organizations called Management Zones. Both programs apply to all industries and local governments, but the nitrate program is implemented by prioritizing areas according to nitrate exceedances (above the drinking water standard) in groundwater.

Salt Control Program Prioritization and Optimization Study

The Prioritization and Optimization (P&O) Study began in December 2021 and is expected to take 10 to 15 years. The first task of this study was to complete a Baseline Characterization Report, which compiled data including land use, water quality, salt sources, and other information relevant to both science and policy of salt management. The information in the Baseline Characterization Report will be used as foundational information for the remainder of the study, which aims to predict how different management approaches will affect salt accumulation in different parts of the Central Valley under various scenarios, such as drought, and natural factors such as soil type and climate. This report was finalized in early 2024.

The P&O Study consultant team completed two archetype studies – one in the Delta-Mendota Subbasin and one in the western Kings Subbasin. Archetype studies represent larger parts of the Central Valley and are used to evaluate salinity targets for protecting agricultural and municipal water uses. These areas were selected as archetype study areas because they are high priority areas for salinity management and have adequate groundwater data with which to perform modeling, among other factors. In addition to these studies, the P&O Study technical team completed an evaluation of salt management technologies to provide current information on the state, cost, and features of various salt management approaches to inform selection of technologies for specific projects and geographical areas. The next P&O Study task will be to select pilot study areas to conduct more refined analyses and apply lessons learned during the archetype studies.

Surveillance and Monitoring Program (SAMP)

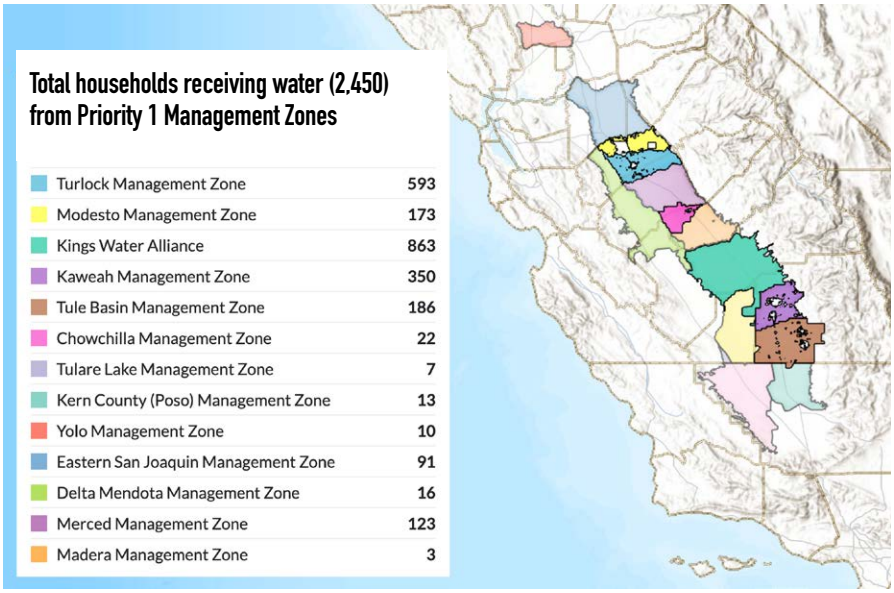
This program tracks water quality in surface waters and groundwater across the region using data from existing state and federal monitoring programs to avoid duplication and maximize value. It will provide information about the current conditions and trends of salinity in major surface water bodies and salinity and nitrate in groundwater. The Central Valley Salinity Coalition (CVSC), in coordination with the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control and State Water Resources Control Boards are leading this effort. All Central Valley dischargers covered by salt and nitrate control requirements will pay to fund the SAMP. Larger dischargers typically pay higher fees than smaller contributors. Fees are based on factors such as permit type and discharge volume. All collected fees support the Central Valley Salinity Coalition's work to implement SAMP Workplan and Quality Assurance Project Plan, including data collection, analysis, and reporting. Billing begins in May 2026.

Nitrate Control Program

Priority 1 and 2 management zones continue to implement their Implementation Plans. A tentative draft of the Modesto Management Zone Order was released in March with a 30-day public review period. It approves their Management Zone Implementation Plan, modifies the associated ILRP permit, and creates additional Monitoring and Reporting Programs (MRPs) for all the other sectors (Dairy, Bovine, Poultry, Non-15). It will be brought to the Regional Board in June 2026.

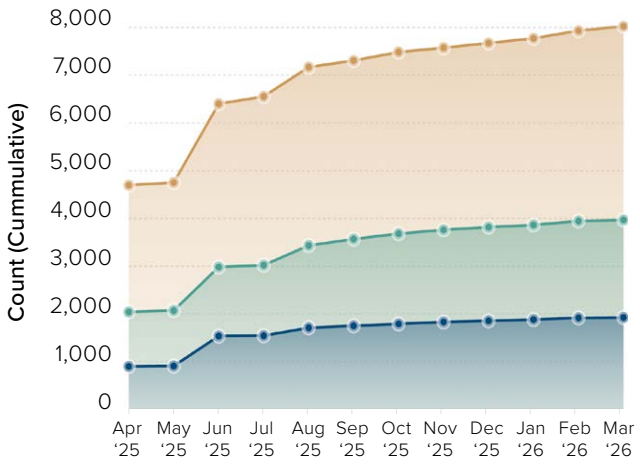
Management Zones ask households who might be eligible for free bottled water delivery to fill out an application. The applications are slightly different for each area, but take little effort, and there are extensive communication and support provided to applicants.

Outreach activities of the Nitrate Control Program are summarized in the figures below.



Accessed April 2026. Source: https://cvsalts.mljenv.com

When a household submits an application and is determined to be eligible, the Management Zone tests the residential well water to find out if levels of nitrate (and sometimes other contaminants) exceed safe drinking water levels. If it does, the Management Zone will immediately begin weekly deliveries of free, clean drinking water for that household. As the CV-SALTS program has grown, increasing numbers of Central Valley residents are getting access to safe water for their homes.



Monthly Data (Last 12 Months)

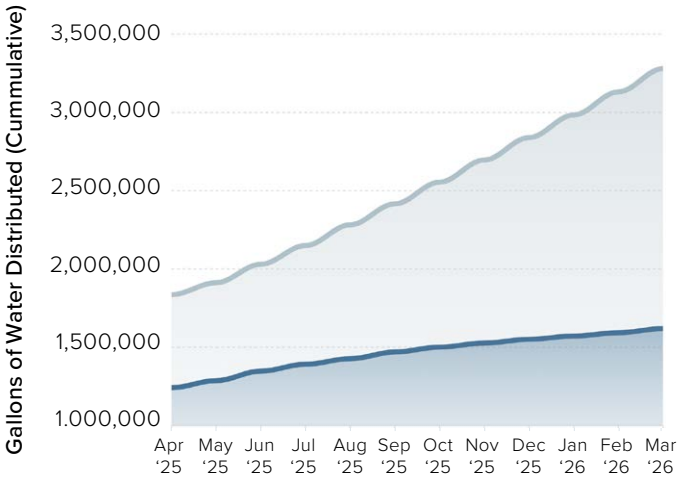
Applications Submitted

Eligible Wells Tested

Wells Above Nitrate Standard

3,968

Wells tested since 2021



Monthly Data (Last 12 Months)

via filling stations

via bottles

4,899,105

Gallons of water distributed since 2021

Accessed April 2026. Source: https://cvsalts.mljenv.com

Learn More

CV-SALTS
www.cvsalinity.org

Valley Water Collaborative (Modesto and Turlock subbasins)
https://valleywaterc.org

Chowchilla Management Zone
https://www.maderacountywater.com/cv-salts

Kings Water Alliance
http://kingswateralliance.org

Kaweah Water Foundation
http://www.kaweahwater.org

Tule Basin Management Zone
https://www.tulemz.com

Bay-Delta Plan

Agreements to Support Healthy Rivers and Landscapes (Agreements) refer to the "voluntary agreements" approach advanced by a group of state, federal and local agencies that would implement the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program. Assembly Bill 102 and Senate Bill 102, if funded, would maintain and extend almost $352 million of funding for the Agreements in the 2025-2026 state budget.

The Program is under consideration by the State Water Resources Control Board as part of the updated process for the Bay-Delta Plan. The approach aims to restore ecosystem health and improve water reliability using a collaborative and adaptive strategy to protect fish and wildlife and local economies. Read more about the program here.

Program Details:

In November 2025, The State Water Board held a workshop on the Draft Scientific Basis Report Supplement for the Tuolumne Healthy Rivers and Landscapes (T-HRL) Proposal (or Voluntary Agreement). The Tuolumne Voluntary Agreement represents Modesto Irrigation District, Turlock Irrigation District, and the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. It includes January to June flow and non-flow commitments, which would be implemented initially for an 8-year period. Non-flow commitments include constructed floodplain habitat, gravel cleaning, a predator control program, and steps to enhance summer rearing habitat for salmonids.

The Draft Bay-Delta Plan was revised in December 2025, and includes two implementation pathways that would go into effect upon Plan adoption: the Voluntary Agreement pathway incorporates HRL flow and habitat commitments and would apply to HRL water rights; the regulatory pathway would apply to other water rights as well as HRL water rights if the Voluntary Agreement pathway is discontinued. The December revision also included incorporation and designation of tribal beneficial uses and updated flow and habitat accounting for the Voluntary Agreement pathway.

Learn More

Bay-Delta Watershed
www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/bay_delta/

Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program
resources.ca.gov/Initiatives/Voluntary-Agreements-Page

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Land IQ provides these regulatory updates to help our clients stay informed about regulatory programs related to agriculture and water in California. To learn more about the regulatory and technical support that Land IQ provides to irrigation and water supply districts, GSAs, commodity groups, and private and public agencies, please visit our website at www.landiq.com or contact:

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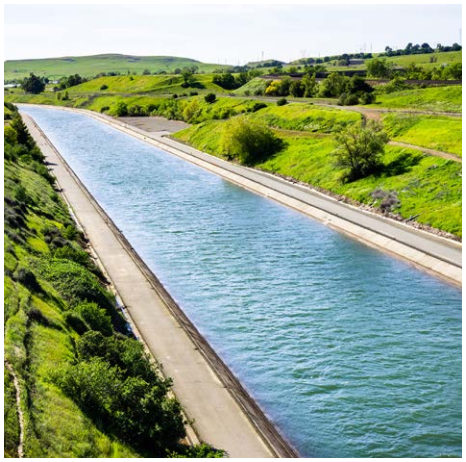
916-517-2484



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