

# Tensions grow as Calif. groundwater law takes shape

By Ryan Sabalow, Sacramento Bee

HANFORD – Drive the farm roads of sparsely populated Kings County, and it's hard to miss them: clusters of pipes, cylinders and electrical boxes jutting from the soil every few hundred yards or so, in almost every direction. These are the groundwater pumps that ensure water soaks the vast fields of tomatoes, corn, alfalfa, cherries, almonds and walnuts even when the ditches run dry.

They've helped make agriculture the single largest industry in Kings County, where crop values actually have grown by \$753 million during California's drought.

So maybe it shouldn't have surprised County Supervisor Doug Verboon, who owns a small walnut farm, that he got a hostile reception at a recent gathering after he suggested the county impose restrictions on drilling new wells and selling groundwater to other counties.

The tensions in Kings County offer just a taste of what's expected in cities and towns throughout California's farm belt over the next few years as local officials work to enact the state's first-ever groundwater regulations. They are under orders to begin actively managing underground aquifers that for generations have been treated as a private resource, with property owners empowered to dig wells and extract as much water as they wanted without particular regard for their neighbors or government agencies.

This year alone, farmers across the state lost nearly 9 million acre-feet of surface water from the state and federal water delivery networks, nearly half their usual supply.

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