

Modesto Irrigation District to give farmers extra water

Tuolumne River levels mean district can give bonus

John Holland, Modesto Bee, 5-26-10

Call it an embarrassment of riches.

The Modesto Irrigation District has so much Tuolumne River water this year that it will offer its farmers a little more for free on top of what they buy.

The district board voted 5-0 on Tuesday to take that step in the hope that the extra water will seep past the soil and recharge the underground aquifer. The groundwater, in turn, could be tapped when droughts reduce the river supply.

It's a sensible way to manage water, directors agreed, but they worry that people elsewhere might not look so kindly on the surplus flooding of fields in the MID service area.

As Director Tom Van Groningen put it, "What are the PR implications for the thirsty folks who are looking at this and salivating just a bit?"

The MID, which has offered recharge water in six of the past 13 years, is one of the many agencies that do this "conjunctive" use of surface and groundwater.

Above-average rain and snow have eased the drought in many parts of California. Full supplies are available to irrigation districts with fairly secure water rights, including Modesto, Turlock, Oakdale and South San Joaquin.

The situation has improved somewhat in parts of the San Joaquin Valley that had faced severe cutbacks because of fish protections in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, but chronic water shortages remain in those areas.

MID officials are concerned that other agencies will see the reliable Tuolumne River supply and try to get some of it for farming, fisheries or other uses elsewhere.

The district promotes groundwater recharge as a "beneficial use" of the river supply under water-rights law.

The idea was praised by Mike Wade, executive director of the California Farm Water Coalition, based in Sacramento. He said water shortages in other areas should be fixed by increased storage and delta improvements, not by tapping the MID supply.

"The Modesto Irrigation District has done a great job over the years of managing water," he said.

MID Director Cecil Hensley, who represents the eastern part of the district, said ranchers in his area need plenty of river water to raise feed.

Groundwater generally flows from east to west, he said, so recharge on the east side will benefit the west.

The MID's water allocation for this year works like this:

- 3½ acre-feet of river water is available for the base charge of \$27 per acre. An acre-foot is enough to cover an

acre 1 foot deep.

- Half an acre-foot of river water will be offered beyond that for free, to encourage recharging.
- The fifth acre-foot of river water will sell for \$13.50.
- Any additional water will come from district-owned wells, where available, for \$20 an acre-foot.