

# Ground water worries mount for farmers

Seth Nidever, Hanford Sentinel, 12-2-09

The battle over Kings County's dwindling water supplies is going underground.

Fresno County farmer Philip Erro is circulating a petition asking Kings County supervisors to pass an ordinance prohibiting anybody from pumping ground water after selling their surface water rights.

The target of Erro's petition is no mystery: Sandridge Partners, a Bay Area business partnership with 50,000 acres of farmland in western Kings County. Earlier this year, Sandridge sold \$73 million in state water rights to the Mojave Water Agency in San Bernardino County.

The sale has angered some local farmers and focused attention on the touchy subject of ground water regulation. Three years of drought and environmental restrictions on water pumped from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta has caused farmers to pump increasing amounts of ground water, depleting supplies and threatening to sink freeways, canals and runways.

The issue has hit hardest on the Westside, where lack of local rivers means that scarce ground water is being used up faster than anywhere else.

Sandridge plans to pool ground water supplies from its land and adjacent property to make up for the 14,000-acre-foot allotment it sold to the Mojave Water Agency, according to Sandridge partner John Vidovich.

Erro, dependent on those ground water supplies, wants Kings County to make it harder for somebody else to do what Sandridge did.

"Without that ordinance, there's no penalty for the landowner to sell surface rights ... and deplete the ground water, too," Erro said.

John Vidovich, a partner at Sandridge, couldn't be reached for comment Monday.

Supervisors have yet to take up the issue as an action item. But pressure is increasing as growers nervously look east to see how the Sierra snowpack turns out.

Some think Erro's petition is too narrowly focused.

"We've been talking about more of a ground water management plan," said Kings County Supervisor Joe Neves.

Supervisors have been looking at surrounding county ordinances to get some ideas, Neves said.

But the issue is tricky because it requires water managers and political leaders to walk in the minefield of near-sacrosanct private property rights. Still, many see regulations as the future of area ground water.

Erro's petition is the first step toward comprehensive water management on the Westside.