

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 to balance groundwater supply and demand and address climate change-driven water scarcity. If unmanaged, fallowed 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.

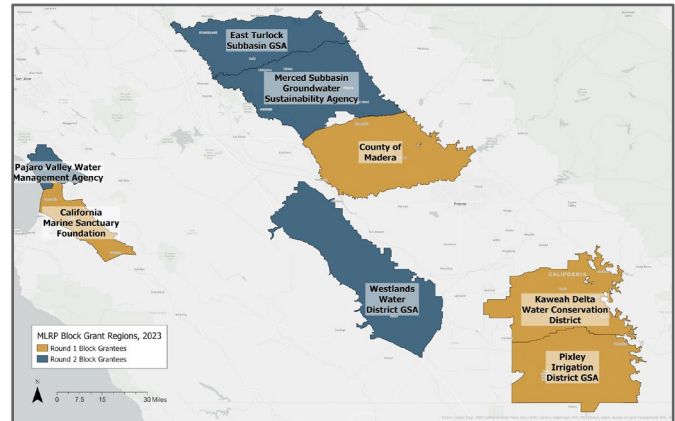
Supporting regional coordination

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 two rounds of applications, the Department of Conservation awarded block grants to eight agricultural regions facing significant water scarcity and agricultural transitions.



Round 1 and Round 2 Block Grant Recipients

Turlock Subbasin MLRP

The Turlock Subbasin Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program (MLRP) is being spearheaded by the East Turlock Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Agency (ETSGSA) under a MLRP grant agreement with the California Department of Conservation. The Turlock MLRP is committed to regional planning and implementation of multibenefit projects that increase groundwater sustainability, while supporting a viable agricultural economy, increasing native wildlife habitat, and improving community and health outcomes.

The Turlock MLRP Partners are working with stakeholders to identify, prioritize, develop, and implement land repurposing projects that provide the greatest impact on groundwater sustainability, while providing additional benefits such as soil health, flood protection, and economic resilience. Key project outcomes include reducing groundwater demand by up to 30,000 acre-feet per year, enhancing water quality, and protecting wildlife habitats.

The program aims to reduce groundwater demand by transitioning up to 20,000 acres of irrigated agricultural land to alternative, less water-intensive uses. By encouraging innovative land-use practices through the use of incentive payments, the MLRP aims to empower growers in the Turlock Subbasin to re-imagine how they use their agricultural land, developing alternative land uses that while also achieving measurable environmental, community, and economic benefits.

Additionally, the MLRP will foster partnerships with local stakeholders and develop self-implementable strategies to support long-term sustainable agriculture in the Turlock Subbasin.

The MLRP's strategic approaches prioritize projects that integrate with existing agricultural operations, emphasizing those that can be self-implemented by growers. This includes converting lands to less water intensive uses or alternative practices that benefit groundwater basin conditions, strategically locating projects to achieve multiple objectives. By promoting these sustainable practices, the MLRP aims to preserve working farmland, mitigate the



Stormwater capture and retention pond within repurposed orchard lands, Turlock Subbasin

negative impacts of traditional fallowing, and ensure the long-term health of the agricultural economy and local communities.

An important component of the Turlock MLRP is outreach to and engagement with local stakeholders to integrate their feedback into the program's development. Outreach and engagement includes meetings with diverse stakeholder groups, targeted engagement with disadvantaged community members, farmers, and landowners, as well as development of informational materials aimed at educating stakeholders about land repurposing opportunities.

Our Partners and Collaborators

- East Turlock Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Agency (ETSGSA)
- West Turlock Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Agency (WTSGSA)
- California Department of Conservation (DOC)
- Formation Environmental
- EKI Environment & Water, Inc.
- Environmental Science Associates, Inc.
- East Stanislaus Resource Conservation District (ESRCD)
- East Merced Resource Conservation District (EMRCD)
- Self-Help Enterprises (SHE)
- Sustainable Conservation

Learn More and Get Involved

Stakeholders interested in learning more about the program or getting involved in multibenefit land repurposing projects should reach out to: etsgsa-support@formationenv.com.

