



Community and Grower Engagement in Multibenefit Land Repurposing



Multibenefit land repurposing is the practice of transitioning irrigated land to new uses that conserve water and deliver new benefits to communities or ecosystems.

Over the next two decades, major agricultural regions in California will transition to sustainable groundwater use, as mandated by the 2014 Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). As much as 750,000 acres of farmland in the San Joaquin Valley may need to be taken out of production by 2040 to balance groundwater supply and demand and address climate change-driven water scarcity and water access inequities.

If unmanaged, fallowed fields can emit dust and worsen air quality, host weeds and pests, and pose an economic threat to agricultural regions. Low-income and other marginalized communities will likely be affected most severely by these impacts.

However, there is an alternative to land fallowing: **multibenefit land repurposing**. Potential new uses of agricultural lands include restored habitat corridors, community recreational spaces, low-impact solar and groundwater recharge basins, all of which can help improve air quality and soil health.

New California Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program

In 2021 California established and funded the [Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program](#) with an initial \$50 million to reduce reliance on groundwater while providing community health, economic well-being, water supply, habitat, renewable energy and climate benefits.

California's Department of Conservation will administer this new program and provide block grants to local agencies, tribes and nonprofits¹. These block grants can in turn be used to develop regional agricultural land repurposing plans and provide payments to landowners for voluntarily participating in land repurposing projects, such as habitat restoration, cover cropping, multibenefit groundwater recharge, community park creation and renewable energy production.

This new program recognizes the importance of engaging disadvantaged communities and requires block grant recipients to actively engage stakeholders, including rural community residents and small-scale growers, in the development of local agricultural land repurposing plans. The program also requires prioritizing projects that benefit disadvantaged communities and socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers for funding.

Block grant applicants

who demonstrate expertise and develop plans to engage with and meaningfully include the feedback of farmers, ranchers, disadvantaged community members and tribes in the development and implementation of land repurposing will be ranked more competitively and be more likely to receive funding from the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program.

Block grant recipients can use funding from the program for outreach-related expenses such as translation services, stipends to compensate participants for their time and input, and other services to alleviate barriers to participation such as transportation and child care.

For more information on eligible outreach, education and training costs, please see [Section 5](#) of the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Guidelines.

UC Merced Lessons Learned

Recognizing the importance of involving often over-looked communities, University of California, Merced, researchers launched a project in 2021 to identify the priorities of underserved populations who may not otherwise be participating in SGMA and land use discussions, and determine the best strategies to engage them.



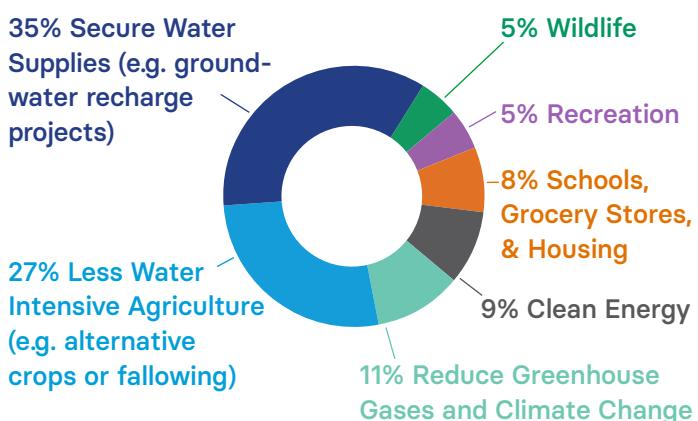
Videos open the door to conversation

UC Merced Ph.D. student Vicky Espinoza developed a trilingual (Spanish, Hmong and English) YouTube channel, [CaliWaterAg](#), to address a knowledge equity gap by providing digestible information on the science and policy of water and land use management in California. The channel covers water management challenges and opportunities under SGMA, potential land use options to conserve water, and ways that community members can actively inform local water and land use solutions. These videos provide a common foundation of knowledge for community members, who could then choose to participate in workshops that explored SGMA and approaches to addressing groundwater overdraft, including multibenefit land repurposing options.

UC Merced hosted workshops and conducted a bilingual survey in 2021 to hear directly from impacted stakeholders and community members about their preferences for land repurposing.

The following pie chart shows the priorities of the survey's 149 respondents. While these results provide one snapshot of broad preferences for land uses among San Joaquin Valley residents, more targeted surveys are recommended to best understand the unique preferences and priorities for local and regional land repurposing.

Land Use Priorities



¹ Eligible Block Grant Applicants include: (1) Groundwater Sustainability Agencies ("GSAs"), (2) federally recognized California Native American tribes, (3) non-federally recognized California Native American tribes on the contact list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission; (4) public agencies; (5) nonprofit groups with 501(c) status; and (7) watermasters implementing an approved groundwater sustainability plan or approved alternate plan.

Recommendations for effective community engagement on land repurposing



1. INCREASE INFORMATION ACCESSIBILITY

- **Recorded videos can provide digestible information** and be watched when convenient. Short videos (aim for less than 15 minutes) help maintain audience interest and attention.
- **Offer multilingual materials** (e.g., brochures, videos, meetings, meeting announcements, social media postings). Find subject experts that speak constituents' preferred language (Spanish, Hmong, etc.) to present material or use a translator well-versed in the terminology.
- **Distribute materials across multiple channels** to be more inclusive and reach a broader audience. This could include mail, text message, email, websites, and informational flyers at schools, grocery stores, post offices, community centers and fire stations.
- **Consider using surveys to learn about constituents' knowledge, values and preferences on land uses.** Using different platforms to conduct surveys (e.g. mail, in-person, web, email, or text) is highly recommended. Ensure survey questions across the different platforms include the same questions to allow for consolidation of survey responses. Allow ample time for completing the survey, send repeated requests, and provide reminders of the survey deadline.
- **If hosting a workshop or webinar, use interactive presentations** to engage the audience, maintain interest and attention, and spark discussion. Consider using software that implements interactive polls remotely (e.g., Zoom) or both remotely and in-person (e.g., Mentimeter). Some community

members may not have access to reliable broadband, so keep in mind that online forums exclude a large portion of community members in the Valley, and consider providing a call-in option.

- **Hold meetings or workshops at times and locations that are feasible** for most participants to attend, or offer multiple meetings or workshops on different days/times with transportation and child care provided.

2. PROVIDE CLEAR DEFINITIONS

- **Provide clear, concise definitions** to new terminology or complicated concepts (e.g., carbon credits, carbon sequestration, aquifers, groundwater recharge).
- **Review different land repurposing options** with participants in terms of costs and benefits to their community.
- **Provide examples**, including visuals, of what land repurposing options could look like to help stakeholders better envision what they would like to see in their community.

3. LEARN FROM YOUR COMMUNITY

- **Diverse perspectives** help create equitable, locally representative and resilient climate change solutions. Think about underrepresented groups in your groundwater basin and ensure that they are included in the conversation. These groups often include but are not limited to communities of color, those for whom English is a second language, state-defined "disadvantaged communities"², native/tribal groups, small-scale farmers and refugee farmers.
- **Actively learn and listen** to stakeholders as they face environmental and water challenges and share insights about their community needs.
- **Use a combination of methods to obtain community input** to broaden reach and increase diversity, equity and inclusion in community land repurposing plans. These methods could include surveys, workshops and webinars.
- **Create an advisory committee that represents diverse stakeholder groups** to guide the creation of agricultural land repurposing plans. Advisory committees are also a powerful way to ensure priorities of low-income communities and small-scale growers and ranchers are reflected in planning and repurposing projects.

² For the purposes of the Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program, the Department of Conservation defines a disadvantaged community as a community with a median household income less than 80 percent of the statewide average.



Restoring habitat for species like this San Joaquin kit fox is one land repurposing option growers can use to conserve groundwater.

Guiding Principles for Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning

Recognizing the pressing need to include historically underrepresented voices (often predominantly Black, Brown and Indigenous communities of color) in local planning efforts, CivicWell developed the following [seven principles](#) to guide equitable collaborative planning:

- 1. Acknowledge and re-evaluate** previous histories of inequitable decision-making.
- 2. Require** all planning processes, projects and/or grantees to develop a plan for building authentic community relationships.
- 3. Increase and promote accessibility** to public meetings, whether online or in person.
- 4. Foster two-way communication** and reciprocity with your community.
- 5. Focus on building relationships** with local organizations or informal groups that are already engaging with marginalized communities.
- 6. Coordinate** with partner agencies and across internal departments to leverage resources, staff and data to address participant fatigue.
- 7. Be responsive** to the interconnectedness of community concerns.

Case Study: Fairmead Groundwater Resilience Project

The Fairmead Groundwater Resilience Project is one emerging example of a land repurposing project with strong community benefits. The project will evaluate land repurposing opportunities and assess groundwater recharge potential that can improve community well reliability. Implementation of the project will enhance Fairmead's drinking water supply and stabilize groundwater levels in the surrounding area. The project is a collaborative effort led by Madera County in partnership with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, Sustainable Conservation and CivicWell. It is supported by Fairmead Community & Friends, a local organization with strong interest in drinking water and other issues in the Fairmead area.

More resources

[Advancing Strategic Land Repurposing and Groundwater Sustainability in California](#), Environmental Defense Fund

[Climate Change in the San Joaquin Valley: A Household and Community Guide to Taking Action](#), Union of Concerned Scientists

[Collaborating for Success: Stakeholder Engagement for Sustainable Groundwater Management Act Implementation](#), Community Water Center, Clean Water Fund, Union of Concerned Scientists

[Guiding Principles for Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning](#), CivicWell

[Multibenefit Land Repurposing Guidelines, Appendix E: Best Practices for Disadvantaged Community Engagement](#), California Department of Conservation

[Multibenefit Land Repurposing Program](#), California Department of Conservation

Contacts:

Anna Schiller, Environmental Defense Fund, aschiller@edf.org

Vicky Espinoza, UC Merced, caliwaterag@gmail.com

