

Agriculture

Fast Facts

- The County Agriculture Commissioner estimates that the total gross value of Santa Clara County agriculture in 2008 was about 250 million dollars.
- While agriculture uses less than 1 percent of the water used in North County, nearly half of South County water is used for agriculture. Over 90 percent of this need is met by groundwater, although some agricultural users receive surface water directly from water district facilities and some receive recycled water.
- Many agricultural users in the San Joaquin Valley and elsewhere have seen their water supplies cut by 90 percent in 2009. Meanwhile, the water district has asked its water users to reduce water use by only 15 percent.
- The water district has kept agricultural rates less than 25 percent of non-agricultural rates since 1990. Agricultural users are currently charged \$16.50 per acre-foot for water. Non-agricultural groundwater users pay \$275 per acre-foot and \$520 per acre-foot in South County and in North County, respectively.
- An acre foot of water is typically used by two families of five in a year.



Santa Clara County, the one-time “Valley of Heart’s Delight” still has pockets of agriculture in this largely urbanized area.

Local communities have relied upon groundwater since the 1850s, when they first drilled wells to supply water to residents and agriculture. In 1913, a group of farmers asked the federal government for relief from the increased cost of pumping due to declining groundwater levels. In 1919, the Farm Owners and Operators Association presented a resolution to the county board of supervisors expressing strong opposition to the waste resulting from flowing artesian wells and raising the issue of building dams to supplement existing water supplies. By 1921, nature could not replenish the water being pumped, resulting in steep drops in groundwater levels and land subsidence, the broad sagging of the land surface over many miles. County voters formed the Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District in 1929 to recharge the North County aquifer to counterbalance pumping and maintain the supply of groundwater while preventing land subsidence.

As South County also experienced significant declines in groundwater levels, in 1938, South County voters approved the formation of the South Santa Clara Valley Water Conservation District, later renamed the Gavilan Water District in 1980. The Gavilan Water District built two reservoirs, Uvas and Chesbro, to

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recharge South County aquifers. Local water supplies, including recharge from these reservoirs, were not enough and groundwater elevations continued to fluctuate. South County voters approved a merger with the larger Santa Clara Valley Water District in 1987, resulting in the integrated water supply management of the county's reservoirs and groundwater subbasins and the delivery of imported water into South County.

Most agricultural users in South County rely primarily on groundwater from the Coyote and Llagas Subbasins for their water supply. The water district actively manages these subbasins to augment the supply nature provides and to protect them from contamination or other threats that would jeopardize this resource.

Three main sources replenish the groundwater in the Llagas and Coyote Subbasins:

1. Deep percolation of local rainfall
2. Water captured and stored in local reservoirs, which the water district releases to creeks and recharge ponds for managed recharge
3. Water imported from Delta, which the water district also releases to creeks and recharge ponds for managed groundwater recharge

Natural groundwater recharge from rainfall is no longer sufficient as it was 75 years ago. The water district's recharge programs, using both local and imported water sources, have helped avoid overdraft of the groundwater subbasins and kept groundwater levels at higher and more stable levels than they would have been otherwise. This increases water supply reliability and reduces costs as well owners use less energy to pump the water.

Also important to agricultural water users are water district programs that indirectly help keep groundwater elevations from dropping by reducing demands on the subbasins: water recycling and water conservation. In addition to benefitting all users of groundwater by reducing pumping demand, these programs also directly benefit the participants. The water district conducts growers meetings and provides technical assistance to help growers increase irrigation efficiency. The water district funds a program implemented by the Farm Bureau to provide growers intensive training in irrigation system efficiency and irrigation management. These programs help growers save water and money, and also help them comply with non-point source discharge regulations.

At a time when agricultural water users in the Central Valley and elsewhere in California are seeing rapidly dropping groundwater elevations and significant cutbacks to water deliveries, agricultural water users in Santa Clara County experience a reliable, stable supply at an affordable price.



Crops grown in South San Jose