

## GCID Needs Fast Approval, No Comments

By Rahul Kanakia  
of The Valley Mirror

The Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District can't afford any serious challenge to its massive proposed expansion of groundwater pumping.

If their water gets shut off, they're going to need a new source, and they're going to need it fast. If it doesn't start raining before the end of October, the State Water Resources Control Board will swing into action to protect water quality in the Delta by shutting off GCID's water, possibly until April 1.

After that, allocations might be reduced by 25 percent.

Staring down that barrel, the Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District is armoring itself with the Landowner Groundwater Wells Program, a plan they claim will have no significant impact on the environment. At their Tuesday meeting, the GCID board decided to present its initial study of the project program for 30 days of public comment, after which they will decide whether to approve the program.

The program will use 45-60 landowner wells to pump up to 80,000 acre-feet of water during the winter, and possibly an additional 80,000 acre-feet in the summer, and make the water available to all GCID landowners. GCID is seeking comments on its "negative declaration," which states that the program will have no significant environmental impacts.

GCID estimates that in any year when it has its full water allocation, which is nine years out of 10, it recharges the aquifer by 180,000 acre-feet. Thus, any drop in elevation would only be temporary.

GCID's initial study is a "negative declaration," which states that there will be no significant impact from the program. They estimate that in any year when GCID has 100 percent of its water allocation, it recharges the aquifer system with 180,000 acre-feet of impact.

Since they receive their full allocation nine out of 10 years, they foresee only a temporary impact – that the groundwater table would be lowered by 7.5 feet in the short term.

Environmentalists plan on using the public comment period to register their dissatisfaction with the program, which they say will deplete area aquifers. But any significant challenge to the program could be a disaster for local rice growers.

"If there are comments, we'll evaluate them and if we make findings that those comments are not significant, we can still adopt the negative declaration," said Thaddeus Bettner, general manager of GCID. "But if people raise significant concerns then we'd have to go ahead with an Environmental Impact Report. That would kill any chance of pumping for this fall."

That would mean any landowners who didn't have their own groundwater pumping ability would be left dry for the winter, when the water is typically used for rice straw decomposition and duck blinds.

Jim Brobeck, a technical analyst for the Butte Environmental Council (BEC), wants more specifics from GCID. "They're not being very clear on the project. They don't say what layers they'll be using. They say their recharge is very generous, but it's not clear if it gets down to the shared aquifer. We need to know what wells are being used, what layers they access, and how much each will be pumping."

Brobeck's main concern is that the purported recharge GCID is using to justify the negative impact of their project would only go into shallow aquifers under GCID lands. However, much of the pumping from the project might come from deeper wells that tap into aquifers shared by everyone in the four-county area.

He also believes that GCID monitoring won't detect the long-term effects of their soil subsidence, which might occur months or years after the pumping ceases.

"Their science and promise to monitoring is not legitimate science or monitoring," Mr. Brobeck said. "We can't trust resource exploiters to monitor and police themselves on the resources they're exploiting."

Mr. Bettner, for his part, called for hard evidence.

"Well, if somebody were to come forward with actual data or come up with something to say that this project would cause irreparable harm," Mr. Bettner said. "If they're going to be damaged or our analysis wasn't complete, and they've got other data to show that our project would have a significant effect on the environment."

Despite the lack of information about what wells are going to be used and what aquifers will be tapped, Mr. Bettner placed the burden of worrying about the program's effects, and asking for mitigation, onto local groundwater users.

"I would hope that people would come to us with concern. They could say, 'I have a well at this location, I'm concerned that if you pump at this level, my wells would be impacted.' We could look at historical records and see what the effects are on the aquifer," said Mr. Bettner.

"It's up to somebody to show or demonstrate why they think they are going to be impacted. You can look at groundwater levels throughout the district and see that just within a year there's a significant groundwater variation. We'd be looking at folks to tell us why they think the well wouldn't recover and how they would be impacted."

Lynn Baris, a farmer in Butte County and BEC board member, said, "When neighbors of these large projects have problems with their wells, the organization that has these projects going on always denies that it was their doing. It's the fault of low rainfall for the year. They never take the responsibility that their additional groundwater pumping caused any problems. There is really nothing to say definitely whose fault it is when surface water districts switch to groundwater. It's like the straw that breaks the camel's back."

But for all of GCID's purported openness to public comment, there's clearly a nervousness showing through. At the Thursday board meeting where the program was initially going to be discussed before being rescheduled for Tuesday, Barbara Hennigan, a farmer in Butte County, suggested that water district decisions need to be looked at in a wider context.

"The point should be that decisions are being made that affect a larger area than a single water district. And they're being made at water district meetings, so there should be more community participation," said Ms. Hennigan, afterwards. "For example, people in Glenn County should be interested in what land use decisions should be made over the recharge zone. But they don't control any of that, because it's all in Tehama and Butte county."

But she received short shrift from Don Bransford, chairman of GCID, who responded by saying that they were just trying to do what was right for their landowners.

Even if they activate the plan, GCID does not expect to pump the full 160,000 acre-feet. Mr. Bettner is currently trying to get approval for a deal with the wildlife refuge, where he would send them 25,000 acre-feet in September and October and they would send GCID an equal amount in November and December.

Furthermore, the higher price of groundwater, as opposed to surface-water, is expected to decrease demand for it.

Finally, it's possible that GCID's water rights might be restored before April 1 or that summer allocations won't be cut.

### **Rice Straw Decomposition for Dummies**

Some weeks ago, Sandy Denn, vice-president of the Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District's board, explained how a lack of winter water can hurt crop yields in the coming year.

Unlike wheat straw or other grains, rice stubble requires water to decompose. Unless it rots away in water, the stubble will still be in the fields there at planting time.

In times past, farmers used to be able to burn away the rice straw, but environmental regulations have since put limitations on burning. Now a farmer can only burn 25 percent of his acreage, and then only to control disease. Without water, the rice farmer is somewhat out of luck. He can try to get a permit to burn as much acreage as he can. And he can hire someone to come in and bale the straw (or do it on his own, if he's set up for that). But that only works if your ground is smooth. If it became rough during the harvest, baling the straw becomes unfeasible.

Otherwise, all he can do is stomp the straw into the mud, and pray for rain. If he doesn't get enough moisture, the straw remaining in the fields will hurt crop yields in the coming year by throwing off the nutrients in the soil.