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OID, SSJID agree to water transfer to help drought-stricken West Side farmers

The Oakdale Irrigation District (“OID”) and South San Joaquin Irrigation District (“SSJID”) have approved a water transfer of up to 100,000 acre-feet to assist drought-stricken farmers on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley cut off this year from their normal federal water supplies.

The transfer also will require the approval of the California State Water Resources Control Board (“Water Board”). It involves water OID and SSJID will make available from New Melones Reservoir through conserved, stored water under the districts’ senior water rights on the Stanislaus River.

If the Water Board approves the districts’ water transfer change petition, the water would be moved beginning as early as July 1 down the Stanislaus River and into the Delta, where it would then be pumped south in the federal Central Valley Project (“CVP”) canal for use by member agencies of the [San Luis & Delta Mendota Water Authority](#) (“Authority”). The Authority will pay \$400 per acre-foot for the water, with OID and SSJID equally splitting the proceeds. The proposed transfer would be delivered to farmers who typically would receive water from the CVP, which did not allocate any water this year to south-of-Delta agricultural contractors because of the drought.

“A zero allocation leaves us little option other than to reach out to other agencies who have available water supplies,” said Federico Barajas, Executive Director of the Authority. “Fortunately, OID and SSJID have answered the call. The next step is for the state and federal government to quickly approve the transfer.”

On April 21, California Gov. Gavin Newsom declared a drought emergency after a second consecutive year of below-average snowfall and precipitation. On May 10, in response to April runoff data, the

governor significantly expanded his drought declaration. In making his announcement, the governor emphasized his support of water transfers this year to strategically move water to areas of need while maintaining and improving storage in the state's reservoirs, including Shasta, California's largest.

"OID and SSJID have conserved, stored water in New Melones Reservoir for use in times of drought," said OID General Manager Steve Knell. "The water is there because we've planned for droughts and implemented measures to make sure that it would be there when we need it. The emergency that exists demands extraordinary actions to mitigate the impacts of the drought emergency, and we are pleased to be in a position to help farmers on the west side of the Valley."

Knell and Peter Rietkerk, SSJID's general manager, emphasized that their own customers will receive full water allocations this year, despite the drought.

"With a secured water supply for our own customers and communities, and some contingency supplies if drought continues into next year, our board is also very concerned for the communities in the San Joaquin Valley who have endured over a year of COVID-19 and are now heading into the irrigation season with almost no water supply," Rietkerk said.

As in the past, OID and SSJID would re-invest proceeds from the water transfer into making their own distribution and water systems even more efficient, which in turn helps improve in-district service and create additional conserved water.

In addition to providing water to west side farmers, the proposed transfer also has statewide benefits. Water officials want to hold as much cold water as possible in Oroville and Shasta reservoirs so it can be sent down rivers this fall, when endangered Chinook salmon return to spawn. Cold water is necessary to ensure that salmon eggs are not "cooked" by warm water releases.

In April, rapidly changing hydrology and Delta operations caused a similar proposal to fail. Now, the water supply picture on the Stanislaus River is much clearer, and 2021 drought Delta operations have been approved by the Water Board adoption of Reclamation's and DWR's Temporary Urgency Change Petition. The change in drought depth and breadth to south-of-Delta agricultural lands has dramatically altered the equation for urgency to make water available for agriculture in that region.

About Us: The [South San Joaquin Irrigation District](#) was established in 1909 and is located in Manteca. It provides agricultural irrigation water to about 55,000 acres in Escalon, Ripon and Manteca, and domestic water service to selected cities within its territory. The [Oakdale Irrigation District](#) was created in 1909 and provides agricultural water to about 62,000 acres in northeastern Stanislaus County and southeastern San Joaquin County. The districts are committed to sensible water policies, innovative irrigation techniques, prudent conservation practices, and important investments in biological studies of the river and fish habitat.

The [San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority](#) was established in January 1992 and consists of 27 member agencies providing water service to approximately 1.2 million acres of irrigated agriculture, 2 million people, and 130,000 acres of managed wetlands and habitat of importance to the Pacific Flyway in the San Joaquin, San Benito and Santa Clara valleys.