



COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO



COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

www.slocounty.ca.gov

www.slocounty.ca.gov

Paso Basin GSP Implementation

Fallowed Land Registry for the Multi-Benefit
Irrigated Lands Repurposing (MILR) Program

Agricultural Liaison Advisory Board
January 5, 2026



COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

www.slocounty.ca.gov

Overview

- Timeline
- Background
- Fallowed land registry
- Agricultural Offset Ordinance amendment
- Williamson Act Rules of Procedure amendment
- Benefits to growers



Timeline

- November 3 - Agricultural Preserve Review Committee (APRC)
- January 8 - Planning Commission
- February 3 - Board of Supervisors



Background - Paso Robles Groundwater Basin

- Critically overdrafted
- About 90% of groundwater use is for agriculture
- Wine grapes, the most common irrigated crop, are already a relatively water-efficient crop
- Growers are voluntarily fallowing due to an economic downturn



Background - Paso Robles Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP)

- **State Mandate:** Achieve basin sustainability by 2040
- **Authority:** 5 Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs)
- **Status:** Implementation
- **Primary Strategy:** Groundwater demand reduction
- **Approach:** Voluntary measures first, then mandatory reductions if needed



Background - Multi-Benefit Irrigated Lands Repurposing (MILR) Program

- **Intent:** Reduce groundwater demand by repurposing irrigated land to less water-intensive uses
- **Initial Phase:** Encourage voluntary repurposing, including fallowing
- **Tools:** Fallowed land registry to (1) encourage more fallowing and (2) track and report effects on basin metrics
- **Incentives:** Provide exemptions to County regulations that discourage fallowing (Agricultural Offset and Williamson Act)



Fallowed Land Registry

Intent:

- Encourage voluntary fallowing with a user-friendly format for landowners to self-enroll
- Provide participating landowners with access to best available satellite-based evapotranspiration (ET) data
- Track registered fallowed land to inform GSP implementation



Fallowed Land Registry

Administration:

- Administered by the County Department of Groundwater Sustainability or designated entity
- Landowners may voluntarily submit an application to enroll, subject to review, approval, and annual recertification
- Annual review using satellite-based evapotranspiration (ET) data, removal from registry if non-compliant



Fallowed Land Registry

Eligibility Criteria:

- “Farming units” would be able to voluntarily enroll (defined as contiguous or semi-contiguous parcels managed as a single irrigated farming operation with at least 2 acres of fallowed area)
- Enrollees may delineate areas within the farming unit to fallow for a specified time period
- Fallowed areas must be at least 2 acres, source water from the Paso Basin, and have been irrigated within the previous 5 years or have Ag Offset approval to plant



Fallowed Land Registry

Self-Certification of Neutral Water Use:

Consumptive water use not to exceed water neutrality benchmark

- Applicants would agree to maintain neutral water use for the farming unit while the Agricultural Offset Ordinance (County Code Section 22.30.204) remains in effect
- Subject to verification using satellite-based ET data
- Violations subject to Agricultural Offset enforcement provisions



Fallowed Land Registry

Self-Certification of Neutral Water Use:

Consumptive water use not to exceed water neutrality benchmark

- **Consumptive Water Use:** Consumptive water use for all commercially irrigated crops within a farming unit, to be calculated as an average of the 3 highest annual consumptive water use values within the previous 5 years based on satellite-based ET data, or other verifiable data source as authorized by the Groundwater Sustainability Director or designee



Fallowed Land Registry

Self-Certification of Neutral Water Use:

Consumptive water use not to exceed water neutrality benchmark

- **Water Neutrality Benchmark:** Consumptive water use for all commercially irrigated crops within a farming unit as evaluated at the time of enrollment in the fallowed land registry, to be calculated as an average of the 3 highest annual consumptive water use values within the 5 years preceding the application date based on satellite-based ET data, or other verifiable data source as authorized by the Groundwater Sustainability Director or designee, in addition to the increase in consumptive water use allowed by an Agricultural Offset Clearance or Exemption issued by the County



Agricultural Offset Ordinance Amendment

- **Applicability:** Most of the irrigated crops in the GSP area (95+%)
- **Timeline:** Adopted before GSP as an interim measure to protect the basin; terminates January 1, 2028
- **Regulations:** Restricts new and expanded irrigated crop production that would increase groundwater demand; growers must apply to replant within 5 years of stopping irrigation



Agricultural Offset Ordinance Amendment

- **Issue:** Some growers may not fallow land for fear of missing this “5-year lookback” and not being able to resume planting
- **Recommended Amendment:** Exempt fallowed lands from the offset ordinance if they are enrolled



Williamson Act Rules of Procedure Amendment

- **Applicability:** Countywide (200,000+ acres in the basin participate)
- **Purpose:** Farmland owners enter into contracts with the County to receive reduced property taxes in exchange for maintaining land in agricultural production



Williamson Act Rules of Procedure Amendment

- **Issue:** Contracts may require ongoing irrigated crop production; fallowing could violate contract terms and jeopardize tax benefits
- **Recommended Amendment:** Amend program rules to not disqualify properties for not irrigating if they are enrolled in a County-approved fallowed land registry (consistent with APRC recommendation)



Benefits to Growers

- Exemption from the Agricultural Offset Ordinance “5-year lookback”
- Exemption from Williamson Act contract irrigation requirements
- Access to farming unit-specific satellite-based ET data
- Self-certification of neutral water use per farming unit instead of applying for Agricultural Offset Clearance from the Department of Planning & Building when replanting



Questions?

Contact Blaine Reely (breely@co.slo.ca.us)
Groundwater Sustainability Director



COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

www.slocounty.ca.gov



COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO



COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO

www.slocounty.ca.gov

www.slocounty.ca.gov