DATE: August 17, 2023



TO: Carlos Suarez, State Conservationist, NRCS – California

FROM: Scott Valley Agriculture Water Alliance (AgWA), c/o sari@sisqtel.net

RE: Scott Valley Irrigation Efficiency Priority Target Needs for EQIP (Siskiyou County)

Scott River is a major tributary of the Klamath River in Siskiyou County and is the focus of intensive state, federal, and tribal scrutiny over its water use for farms and fish. Supporting runs of commercially and tribally valuable Chinook salmon, the ESA- and CESA-listed threatened species of Coho salmon, and the popular sport fishing species of steelhead trout, the river’s fish attract wide public attention among fisheries advocates. Water from the stream system, as well as the aquifer, is also needed to sustain the area’s family farms and ranches. Severe restrictions on both surface and groundwater use for irrigation and livestock by the State Water Resources Control Board went into effect during the 2021-22 drought in the name of protecting instream flows for fish. Nowhere else in California was groundwater pumping curtailed by the State as it was in the Scott during this recent drought, or as it could be again soon. Please see the SWB’s Scott River Drought website for confirmation.

Scott Valley, overlying a 100 square mile aquifer in the middle of the 800 square mile watershed, contains productive soils and has been farmed since the 1850s. Average annual precipitation is about 20.5 inches, though streamflow is heavily dependent on snowmelt runoff from the mountains to the west and south. Irrigated acreage of its alfalfa, pasture and grain crops has ranged from 30,000 to 33,000 acres since the 1950s. No surface water storage reservoirs exist in the watershed, unlike most other agricultural areas, so its primary water storage is underground. The aquifer is not considered overdrafted by the state, with a Scott Valley Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP) adopted by the county and approved by the California Dept. of Water Resources under the State Groundwater Management Act (SGMA).

Water management entails balancing supply with demand, as the GSP encourages. With declining precipitation in the Scott River watershed over the past two decades, the supply is shrinking and the demand must also. But the regulatory demands are forcing an even more immediate set of water demand reductions by irrigators. Scott Valley farmers fear they are facing an existential threat from the regulatory demand upon them and they cannot afford to finance all of the needed improvements in irrigation efficiency. Center pivot technology began to be applied here over 15 years ago to help save water and energy, along with soil moisture sensors, variable frequency drives (VFDs) on pumps, and other water conservation practices. In addition, Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR) to help provide more late season streamflow from increased groundwater storage is being implemented in the valley.

Currently, the NRCS-EQIP program does not appear to offer criteria to reflect the critical and atypical situation that Scott Valley’s irrigators find themselves. Local farmers have submitted applications for EQIP funding for center pivots and have been put on the wait list for many years. We are asking that Scott Valley be given priority funding or a specific fund pool so that we do not have to compete with other applicants who are not being asked to curtail groundwater use as has been the case here. This very unique challenge, apart from any other geographic area in the state of California, demands a very unique solution to our crisis. NRCS engineer Lorrie Bundy has estimated that an immediate cost share is needed of $ 5 million to conserve water on 4,000 acres over 3 years, as described in her attached memo.