

# Annual Evaluation of Groundwater Management by the Kern-Tulare Water District Groundwater Sustainability Agency

Tule Subbasin | March 2026



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Executive Summary

The Kern-Tulare Water District Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) (Kern-Tulare) manages groundwater in a southeastern portion of the Tule Subbasin. At the September 2024 Tule Subbasin Probationary Hearing, the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board, or Board) excluded pumpers managed by Kern-Tulare from the requirement to report extractions and pay the associated fees to the State Water Board, based on adequate management of groundwater by Kern-Tulare (referred to as the 2024 Exclusion). Specifically, Board staff found that water users in Kern-Tulare added more water to groundwater than they removed and Kern-Tulare implements projects and management actions to maintain this balance.

In approving the 2024 Exclusion, the Board directed staff to provide an annual evaluation of Kern-Tulare's actions and progress in determining whether the exclusion should be extended for another year. Kern-Tulare has provided information to support its request for continued exclusion for an additional year. In this evaluation, Board staff considers updated information, determines whether the GSA is still managing groundwater adequately, and makes a recommendation that the Board continue the 2024 Exclusion for another year.

For the purposes of this evaluation, staff considers actions and efforts the GSA undertook between September 2024 and September 2025, and also evaluates the GSA's water budget information from October 2019 through September 2024, relative to the historical water budgets from October 1986 through September 2019. Actions that the GSA undertook or continued between September 2024 and September 2025 include increased surface water deliveries, actions to register and meter groundwater extraction wells, and setting and charging fees for groundwater pumping. These actions are designed to better monitor and encourage reductions in groundwater pumping and better manage the GSA's overall water budget. Kern-Tulare's water budget also shows increased groundwater storage since October 2022.

In August 2025, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) released a draft Best Management Practice (BMP) Guidance Document for managing subsidence, which DWR finalized in January 2026 (subsidence BMP). The subsidence BMP provides a useful suite of information for GSAs on how to best manage subsidence, although the timing of the document's release was too late to inform Kern-Tulare's specific actions when staff began to review their request in September 2025. Relatively little land subsidence occurred in the GSA area in the last five years, and the GSA participates in a basin-wide subsidence mitigation plan, in addition to routine groundwater level monitoring. Over the last year, Kern-Tulare took additional steps that align with the subsidence BMP, and already conducts actions that will help manage subsidence within the GSA area.

Staff recommends continuing the exclusion of Kern-Tulare extractors from reporting and fees for an additional year, with annual evaluations to ensure ongoing progress toward sustainability goals. This approach allows staff to evaluate how much recent projects and management actions affect the GSA's water budget. Staff also recommends Kern-Tulare take steps to better evaluate the relationship between water levels and subsidence and update their plan accordingly.

## 1.0 BACKGROUND

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On September 17, 2024, the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board or Board) adopted [Resolution No. 2024-0030](#) (Tule Probationary Resolution), which designated the entire Tule Subbasin probationary under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). Typically, in a probationary groundwater basin, people who extract (pump) groundwater must file an annual [groundwater extraction report](#) with the State Water Board and pay associated fees.

SGMA allows the State Water Board to exclude a class or category of extractions from the probationary requirement for reporting extractions and paying associated fees if 1) they are subject to a local plan or program that adequately manages groundwater or 2) they are likely to have a minimal impact on subbasin withdrawals (Wat. Code, § 10735.2, subd. (c)(1)). In the Tule Probationary Resolution, the State Water Board applied a reporting and fee exclusion to the Kern-Tulare Water District (Kern-Tulare) Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA). While the exclusion is in place, extractors within the boundaries of Kern-Tulare are not required to report their extractions or pay fees to the State Water Board. In granting the exclusion, the State Water Board directed its staff to evaluate the continued adequacy of Kern-Tulare's groundwater management at least annually (Tule Probationary Resolution, p. 12, § 5(c)).

Even with the exclusion, the portions of the Tule Subbasin managed by Kern-Tulare are still on probation and the GSA must continue to address deficiencies in its Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP).

### 1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE STATE WATER BOARD'S 2024 EVALUATION

At the September 17, 2024, Probationary Hearing for the Tule Subbasin, the State Water Board granted Kern-Tulare an exclusion from reporting and fees, based on its status as net-neutral or a net-recharger in the subbasin and its development of a groundwater well registration, reporting, and metering program as well as a charge on groundwater extractions. Board staff evaluated water budget data from October 1986 to September 2019, provided in the 2024 Tule Subbasin Coordination Agreement (2024 Tule Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan Coordination Agreement, pp. Chp. 2, Appendix G). The Board found that Kern-Tulare's conjunctive use of surface water and groundwater had resulted in a balanced water budget, and staff noted that newer

groundwater demand management efforts would likely help maintain this balance into the future (2024 Tule Subbasin Probationary Hearing Final Staff Report, pp. 144-145).

This recommendation was contingent on 1) maintaining a balanced water budget, 2) continuing to implement the well registration program, 3) continuing to accurately measure groundwater extractions, and 4) continuing to charge groundwater extraction fees to encourage a reduction of groundwater extractions when needed to maintain a balanced water budget (2024 Tule Subbasin Probationary Hearing Final Staff Report, p. 144).

## **2.0 GSA 2025 DATA SUBMITTAL**

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In August 2025, the State Water Board requested Kern-Tulare to submit any relevant information to substantiate continued adequate management of groundwater in the GSA's management area. In response, Kern-Tulare provided the following information in September 2025 (Yap Escobedo, 2025a), and in December 2025, in response to the State Water Board request for additional information (Yap Escobedo, 2025b):

- Water budgets for Water Years 2020-2024, including information on groundwater pumping and surface water deliveries.
- Updates on projects and management actions relevant to maintaining a balanced or net-positive water budget.
- An update on general groundwater conditions, as well as groundwater levels in the Santa Margarita and Continental Deposit portions of the GSA, which are sensitive to subsidence.
- An update on its participation in subbasin-wide mitigation plans, its domestic well registration program, and execution of a domestic well mitigation agreement with Self-Help Enterprises.

## **3.0 GROUNDWATER MANAGEMENT EVALUATION**

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Board staff focuses on three key components in evaluating the ongoing adequacy of Kern-Tulare's groundwater management.

First, staff compares recent water budgets to historic data to determine if the GSA was still net-neutral or a net-recharger of groundwater.

Second, staff assesses the progress of Kern-Tulare's well registration and metering programs, groundwater pricing policy, and mitigation program. This evaluation aims to determine whether these measures are effective in encouraging reduction in groundwater pumping and thus support preventing overdraft in Kern-Tulare's portion of the Tule subbasin. Additionally, staff considers whether the mitigation program would likely address pumping impacts not otherwise avoided by Kern-Tulare projects and management actions.

Third, Board staff evaluates whether Kern-Tulare’s groundwater management is still adequate, given the groundwater storage deficit in the basin, ongoing substantial land subsidence in parts of the Tule subbasin, and Kern-Tulare's overall management actions and efforts. Staff provides recommendations for Kern-Tulare to develop improvements for groundwater management in light of new best available data and information; specifically, the Department of Water Resources' final subsidence BMP notes that avoiding significant and unreasonable subsidence in some areas may require bringing groundwater levels up, rather than just preventing further decline (Land Subsidence BMP, 2026, p. 1-1).

### **3.1 GROUNDWATER BUDGET**

In this section, staff evaluates Kern-Tulare’s reported new groundwater budgets for Water Years (WYs) 2020 – 2024, relative to the full record starting in WY 1987, and considers whether the new information indicates continued adequate management to avoid overdraft. The review focuses on the completeness and implications of the budget components, including inflows, outflows, storage change, historical comparison, and the overall water budget balance.

Overall groundwater storage in Kern-Tulare decreased in most years since approximately WY 2013 but partially rebounded in wet years. For WYs 2020 through 2024, water budgets varied from year to year, likely influenced by hydrologic water year type, surface and groundwater fees, and other factors. These data show that gains in storage in wetter years only partially offset losses in storage in drier years; however, groundwater extractions decreased significantly in WYs 2023 and 2024 and groundwater storage increased in those years accordingly (see Figure 1).

The period from WYs 2013 through 2024 included the unprecedented 2012-2016 drought, which resulted in steep declines in surface water availability (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, p. 19) for those who typically relied on that supply and likely increased the demand for groundwater in the Tule Subbasin. Land subsidence, exacerbated by increased pumping during the drought, may have also played a significant role in the decreased surface water use during drought, as subsidence along part of the Friant-Kern Canal resulted in reduced delivery capacity in the canal and the need for canal repairs. This lost capacity led to reduced surface water deliveries for some Friant Division contractors, including Kern-Tulare (United States Bureau of Reclamation, 2020), although repairs completed in 2024 on segments of the Friant-Kern Canal restored some conveyance capacity. Full restoration to the canal’s original design capacity is expected following completion of all phases of the repair project (United States Bureau of Reclamation, 2026).

Even with two significant drought periods (2012-2016 and 2020-2022), average surface water use has decreased since WY 2013 (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, pp. 19-21). The increase in groundwater pumping since WY 2013 is greater in magnitude than the

decrease in surface water use, indicating reduced surface water availability does not fully explain the decline in groundwater storage since WY 2013.

## **3.2 OTHER MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

### **3.2.1 Demand Management and New Supply**

Kern-Tulare is actively managing groundwater pumping as well as delivering surface water to users within the Kern-Tulare Water District. According to the information Kern-Tulare provided:

- In 2024, Kern-Tulare started charging its pumpers a groundwater extraction fee (\$100/acre-foot [AF] in 2024, and \$175/AF in 2025) (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, p. 2). The GSA attributes the 35% decline in pumping between calendar year 2023 and 2024 to this fee (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, p. 11) although WY 2023 was classified as wet and WY 2024 was above-normal in the San Joaquin Valley (California Department of Water Resources, 2024)
- Kern-Tulare delivered 25% more surface water to its customers in 2024 than in the previous year (a wet hydrologic year) and expects to deliver 5% more surface water in 2025 than delivered in 2024 (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, p. 18).
- In March 2025, Kern-Tulare completed construction of three projects identified in its GSP that allow for additional surface water delivery (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, p. 3).

Kern-Tulare's groundwater extraction fee and new supply projects are too new for staff to discern their effects on the GSA's water budgets, but this multi-pronged approach to both discouraging pumping and enhancing supply will be important to preparing for and responding to droughts.

### **3.2.2 Groundwater Well Data Gaps and Mitigation**

Kern-Tulare also provided updates on the status of their well registry, well metering, and well mitigation efforts.

- 100% of the production wells in the GSA are registered with Kern-Tulare (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, p. 1).
- More than 95% of extraction wells in the GSA are metered (up from 75% in 2023), and GSA staff record meter readings monthly (ibid).
- Kern-Tulare is participating in subbasin-wide mitigation plans for the Tule subbasin. Kern-Tulare implements a proactive domestic well program within its jurisdiction. In September 2024, Kern-Tulare executed a Domestic Well Mitigation Agreement with Self-Help Enterprises (2024 Draft Kern-Tulare GSP, Appendix 6). Kern-Tulare contains four domestic wells in the Tule subbasin. Water quality testing identified exceedances in some wells for contaminants including arsenic, nitrate, 123-TCP, and bacterial contamination. Kern-Tulare referred wells with nitrate exceedances to the Tule Management Zone for

mitigation services. For all wells not eligible for this assistance, Kern-Tulare is collaborating with Self-Help Enterprises to implement well seal repairs, disinfection, and installation of Point-of-Use or Point-of-Entry treatment systems, as appropriate. Self-Help Enterprises will provide well stewardship education to affected landowners and conduct ongoing monitoring of water levels and water quality metrics to ensure long-term sustainability. No mitigation claims were submitted in 2024 and 2025; Kern-Tulare attributes the absence of mitigation claims to the proactive program.

Such high-resolution information on the location and timing of groundwater pumping will support more accurate water budgets and groundwater modeling and help the GSA calibrate its projects and management actions to avoid overdraft.

### **3.3 CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS SINCE PRIOR EVALUATION**

State Water Board staff also evaluates whether other new information or science was available to help inform whether the GSA is continuing to adequately manage groundwater. Staff reviews and considers new subsidence-related best management practice (BMP)<sup>2</sup> guidance released by the Department of Water Resources (DWR), and compares Kern-Tulare's subsidence management efforts to the BMP.

#### **3.3.1 Draft Land Subsidence Best Management Practices**

DWR released a draft BMP document for land subsidence in July 2025 and finalized the BMP document in January 2026. According to DWR, the subsidence BMP "... provides information to assist GSAs with developing appropriate approaches to avoid subsidence in areas that are vulnerable to pumping-induced subsidence, and to minimize subsidence in areas that have or currently are experiencing subsidence" (Land Subsidence BMP, 2026). The subsidence BMP specifies that the best practice for GSAs to manage and limit subsidence is to raise groundwater levels above the critical head<sup>1</sup> in areas experiencing subsidence (Land Subsidence BMP, 2026) Maintaining a balanced water budget may not be enough to adequately manage groundwater in areas with substantial subsidence if groundwater levels remain below critical head and subsidence impacts are not mitigated.

Although the draft subsidence BMP was only released in fall 2025 and final version released in January 2026, the document provides helpful information for both the Board's review as well as KTWD's ongoing management actions in the basin.

#### **3.3.2 Subsidence in Kern-Tulare**

Kern-Tulare has experienced some subsidence in the decade since the passage of SGMA, though very little relative to other areas of the Tule subbasin (Figure 2). According to monthly subsidence estimates from satellite-based InSAR data (California Department of Water Resources, 2025b), Kern-Tulare experienced -0.53 feet of land

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<sup>1</sup> According to the draft subsidence BMP, "critical head" is the groundwater level elevation in fine-grained units below which permanent compaction of fine-grained sediments may occur.

displacement<sup>2</sup> from June 2015 to July 2025 at their one representative monitoring site for subsidence (RMS; E0088\_B\_RMS), -0.32 feet of which occurred since 2020. Over the GSA area, the greatest displacement occurred along the southern boundary with the Kern Subbasin (-1.05 ft) while the lowest amount was recorded in the northwestern portion of the GSA, near its border with Delano Earlimart Irrigation District GSA (approximately -0.05 ft; see Figure 3). On average over that period, Kern-Tulare experienced -0.05 ft of land displacement annually. Figure 4 shows the year-to-year spatial distribution of land displacement across the GSA area, highlighting significant interannual variability, with peak subsidence (-0.15 ft) between Jun 2021 and June 2022 followed by progressively reduced subsidence and a transition to uplift (0.06 ft) in the final period.

The subsidence minimum threshold (MT) in Kern-Tulare is coordinated with subsidence MTs throughout the subbasin and therefore was not designed specifically to avoid impacts to the types of infrastructure within Kern-Tulare; however, the GSA commits to mitigation for subsidence-related impacts and participates in a basin-wide mitigation program to address impacts from land subsidence (2024 Draft Kern-Tulare GSP, p. 3-56).

Kern-Tulare indicates that current management actions, monitoring, and SMC align with the subsidence BMP. Specifically, Kern-Tulare points to its comprehensive monitoring network, including InSAR data, twice-a-month measurements of water levels in 11 wells across 3 aquifers to capture seasonal highs and lows, and its metered pumping data collection on all agricultural wells in Kern-Tulare. Kern-Tulare performed a multi-year subsidence trend-based analysis for one RMS well for groundwater levels in the Santa Margarita aquifer to set water level SMC in the confined aquifer, consistent with the subsidence BMP (Yap Escobedo, 2025a, pp. 4,28). However, Kern-Tulare did not report information about how critical head compares to past or current groundwater levels, nor did they indicate critical head was analyzed for any other of their groundwater level RMS wells.

Figure 4 indicates that groundwater levels are likely currently being managed at levels that minimize or prevent subsidence; however, Table 1 below shows that groundwater level MTs could allow for continued subsidence. The table includes information for three of Kern-Tulare's RMS wells for groundwater levels: two completed in the Santa Margarita Aquifer, and one completed in the Lower Aquifer. Kern-Tulare's MTs allow groundwater levels to decline below historical lows (2024 Draft Kern-Tulare GSP, p. 3-24), meaning that the GSA's current groundwater level MTs would allow for additional subsidence. However, groundwater levels remained well above both historical lows and MTs in recent years (California Department of Water Resources, 2025a). In two of the three monitoring wells, spring 2025 water levels were more than 100 feet above historic lows.

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<sup>2</sup> Negative values of land displacement represent sinking of the land, or land subsidence; positive values represent land uplift.

Well	Aquifer	Site Code	MT (ft msl)	Historic low GL elevation & date it occurred (ft msl)	MT minus historic low (ft msl)	GL elevation (Oct. 2024) (ft msl)	GL elevation (Feb. 2025) (ft msl)
24S/27E- 32M001	SMF	357944N1190845W001	-146	-90.39 (9/1/2021)	-55.61	-7.59	38.71
TSMW-6SM	SMF	358325N1190757W001	-110	-69.449 (9/29/2021)	-40.55	-19.95	34.68
TSMW-6L	LA	358328N1190757W001	195	201.44 (10/21/2022)	-6.44	211.14	209.44

*Table 1 - Groundwater level MTs and recent groundwater elevations relative to historical lows observed between fall 1981 and fall 2025 for 24S/27E-32M001 and between fall 2020 and fall 2025 for TSMW-6SM and TSMW-6SM at Santa Margarita Formation (SMF) and Lower Aquifer (LA) groundwater level RMS. GL = Groundwater Levels; ft msl = feet above mean sea level; MT = minimum threshold*

## 4.0 CONCLUSION

Staff recommends continued exclusion of extractors in Kern-Tulare from reporting and fees for Water Year 2026 with ongoing Board oversight and recommends that future exclusions be made contingent on meeting the benchmarks on the items identified below as needing improvement for long-term management success.

The following improvements and actions within Kern-Tulare since the last exclusion request support continued exclusion for the current reporting period:

- Continued evidence and data showing that Kern-Tulare has increased groundwater storage in wet years enough to offset reductions in dry years, with water levels above historical lows.
- Expanded roll-out of groundwater pumping fees to discourage pumping
- Implemented projects to deliver more surface water.
- Implementation of an extensive well registration, metering, and monitoring program.
- Establishment and implementation of a domestic well mitigation program, including proactive well testing of all domestic wells and appropriate mitigation.
- Continued evidence of minor subsidence in the GSA area, with no infrastructure most sensitive to subsidence, planned mitigation where there are impacts, and monthly monitoring of water levels.

However, the actions above are not sufficient for Kern-Tulare to maintain its exclusion for future reporting periods. Kern-Tulare should take steps to implement the following improvements to demonstrate likely long-term management success:

- Evaluate the relationship between water levels, groundwater elevation SMC, and critical head and raise groundwater elevation MTs to prevent exceeding subsidence MTs.

What constitutes “adequate management” may change over time, depending on physical data, progress made by a GSA, and implementation, and during subsequent reviews, the Board may determine that ongoing management is insufficient due to other components of groundwater management not listed above. Notably, the need for coordination extends to the GSAs that have already received exclusions from the Board: exclusions based on adequate management may cease to be appropriate if they prevent the basin from achieving sustainable groundwater management and exiting probationary status.

Finally, staff note that the Tule Probationary Resolution delegates to the State Water Board’s Executive Director the authority to grant Kern-Tulare an exclusion from probation entirely provided that Kern-Tulare continues to manage its portion of the basin adequately and submits a revised GSP to the Board that addresses identified GSP deficiencies.<sup>3</sup> In October 2025, Kern-Tulare released a new draft GSP for public comment. In November 2025, Kern-Tulare communicated to Board staff that Kern-Tulare believes the new GSP addresses deficiencies identified by the Board, and that Kern-Tulare will request an exclusion from probation once the draft GSP is adopted.

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<sup>3</sup> See Tule Probationary Resolution, p. 12, § 5(d).

## 5.0 FIGURES

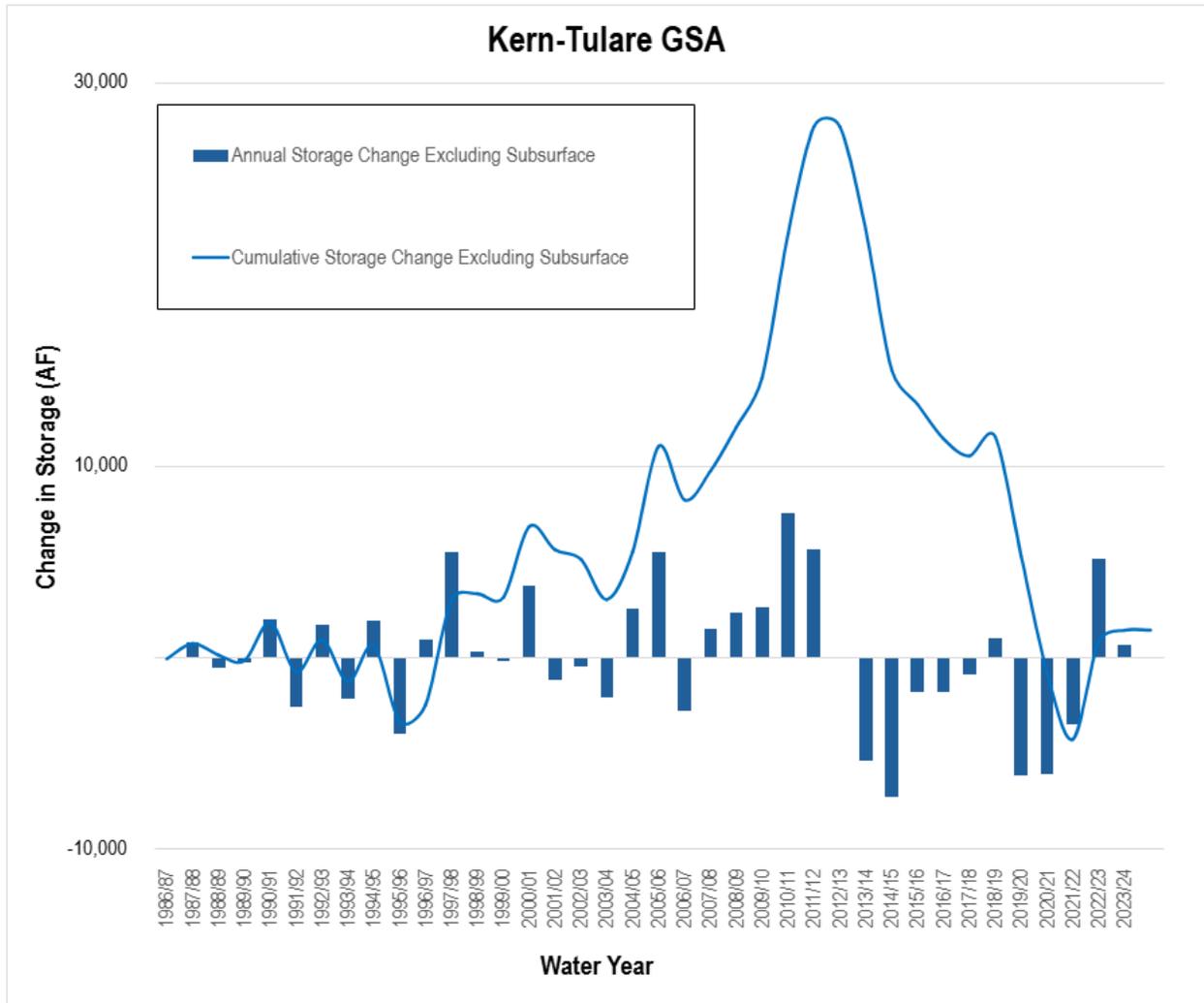
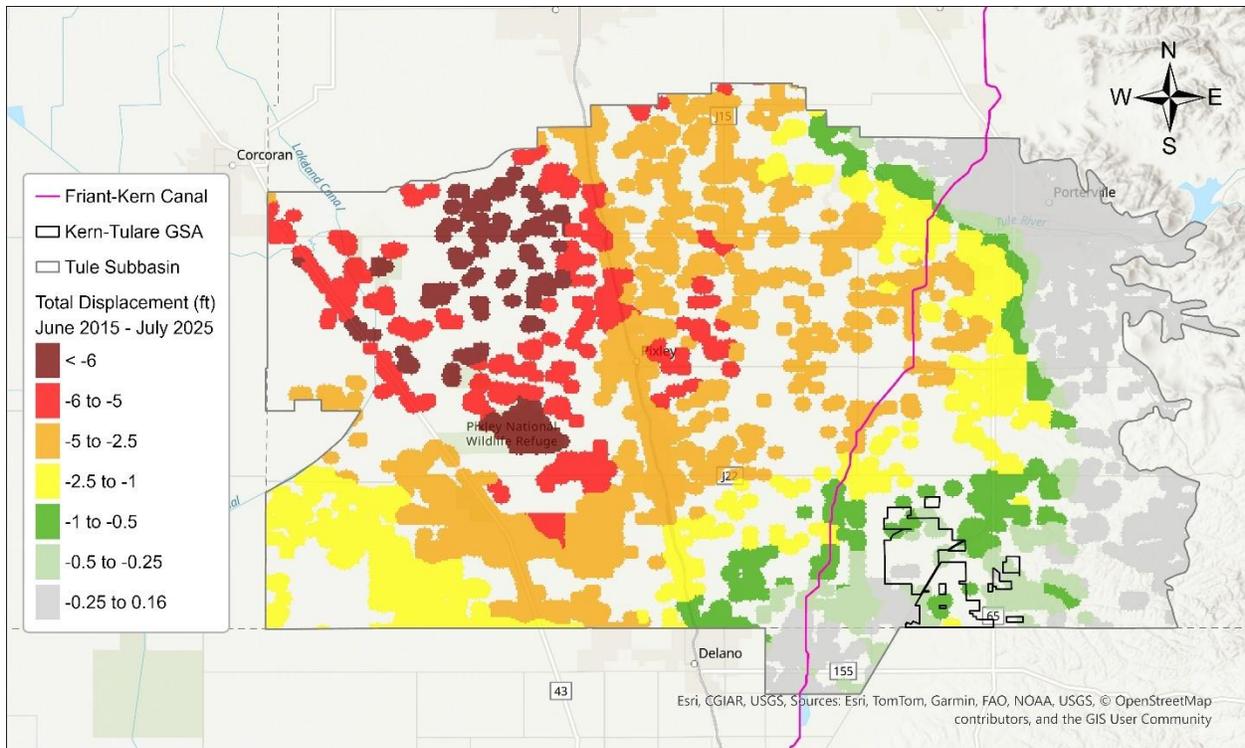


Figure 1 – Kern-Tulare Change in Storage Excluding Subsurface Inflows and Outflows, Water Years 1986-1987 through 2023-2024



**Figure 2 – Total land displacement in the Tule Subbasin, June 2015- July 2025, and Kern-Tulare boundaries**

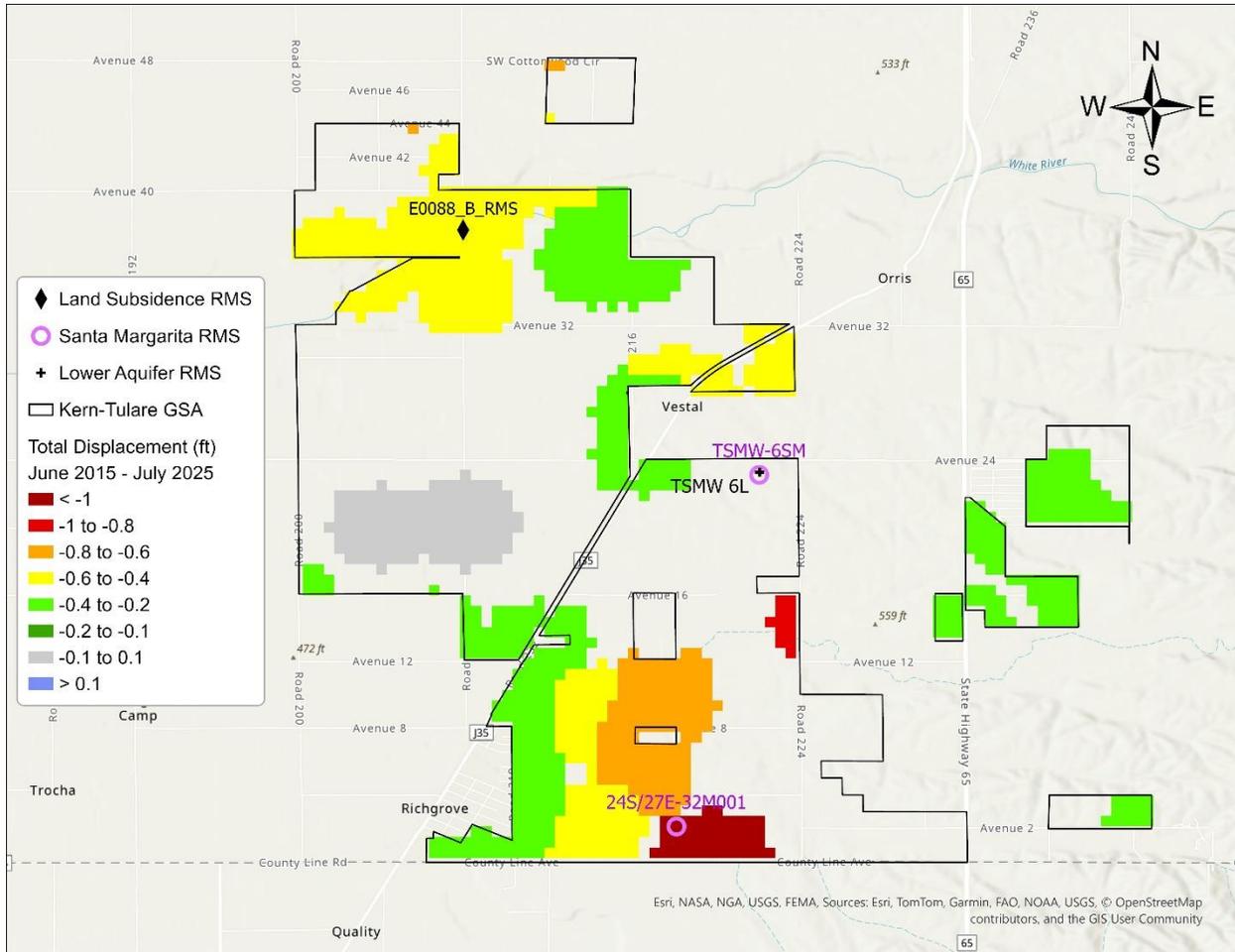


Figure 3 - Total land displacement (ft) in Kern-Tulare from June 2015 to July 2025

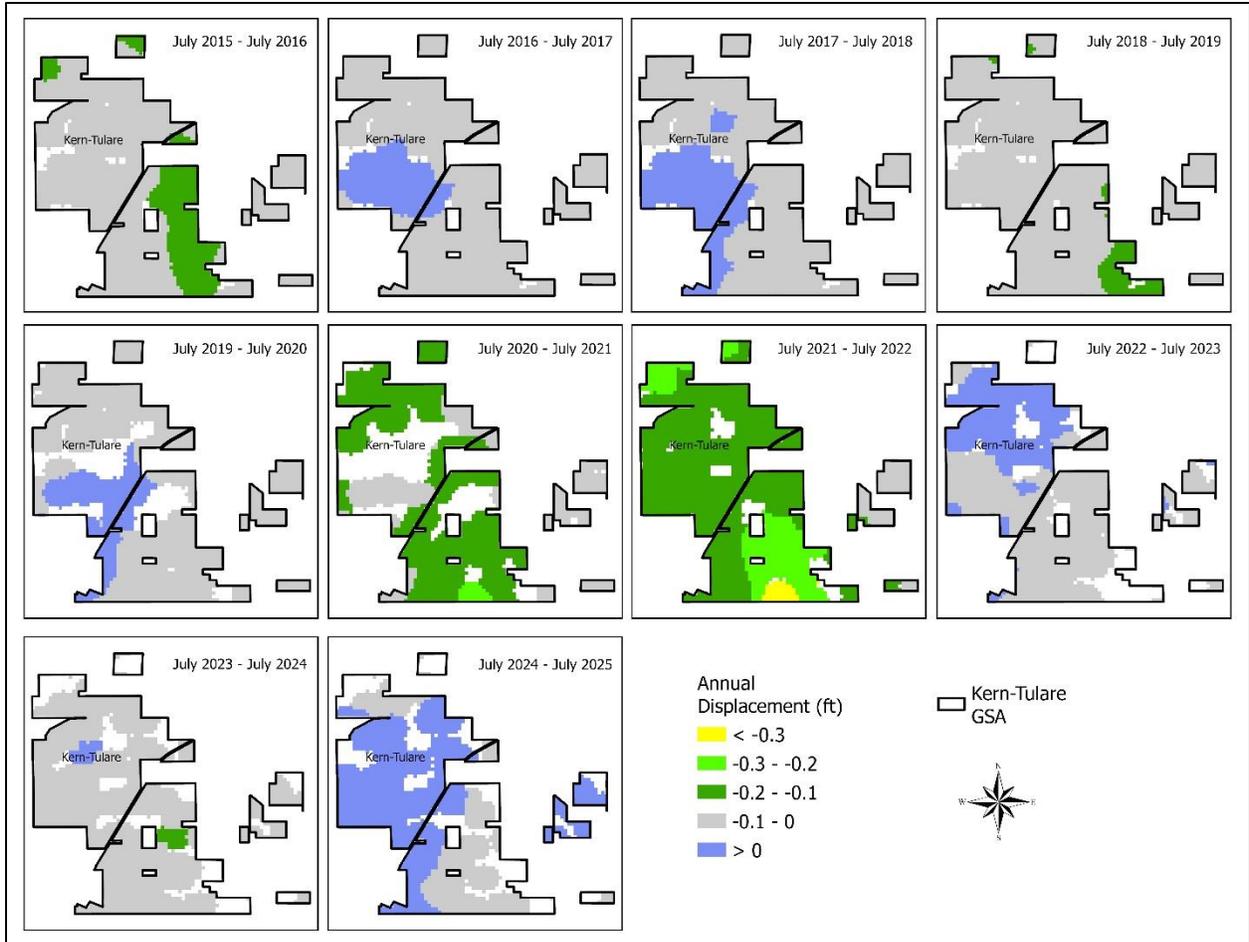


Figure 4 - Annual land displacement (ft) in Kern-Tulare by year (July 2015 - July 2016 to July 2024 - July 2025)

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