Groundwater Benefit Zone Study Frequently Asked Questions

1. **What is a groundwater benefit zone?**

   Maintaining sustainable groundwater is a key part of Valley Water’s mission to provide safe, clean water to Silicon Valley for a healthy life, environment and economy. A groundwater benefit zone is an area where our activities help protect and replenish groundwater supplies. Groundwater pumping charges collected in the groundwater benefit zones fund these activities. These charges are paid by owners and operators of groundwater wells (Well Users) based on the amount of water they pump. Valley Water charges only those Well Users in areas that benefit from Valley Water activities.

   If you live within a groundwater benefit zone but do not pump groundwater, you do not have to pay the groundwater charge.

2. **Why did Valley Water do this study?**

   The groundwater benefit zones were first developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Since that time, Valley Water activities to protect and replenish groundwater have changed. Knowledge about the zones that benefit from our activities has increased. To ensure Well Users are charged fairly and equitably, Valley Water hired a team of experts to conduct a science-based study of how to best define the groundwater benefit zones. The study is intended to provide Valley Water with a scientific, transparent basis for evaluating the current zones and proposing any changes. Total Valley Water revenue will not change as a result of any changes to the zones.

3. **How was the study conducted?**

   The study was conducted by a consulting company specializing in developing, protecting, and managing groundwater and surface water resources. The study looked at how water flows underground using data from the U.S. Geological Survey and other agencies. Local data was also used to understand the effect of Valley Water activities on groundwater levels. The study was reviewed by an independent committee of technical experts, who found the study approach and results to be thorough and equitable. To learn more about the study, you can view the preliminary study report at: [https://www.valleywater.org/gwbenefits](https://www.valleywater.org/gwbenefits).

   The zones proposed in the preliminary study report were created by grouping areas that benefit from similar Valley Water activities, which include:

   - replenishing groundwater with local and imported surface water,
   - delivering surface water as an alternative supply in lieu of groundwater pumping,
   - protecting groundwater from pollutants, and
   - promoting water conservation.

4. **Did the recommended zones change as a result of the stakeholder engagement process?**

   Yes. The consultant’s preliminary study report recommended replacing the existing two zones with six zones. In addition to the consultant’s technical study, Valley Water also sought and considered input and site-specific information from Well Users. Considering all available information, Valley Water staff now recommends a total of four zones. Staff believes there is ample evidence of benefit from Valley Water activities within these zones. Other areas may receive benefit from Valley Water activities; however, staff believes that additional geologic and groundwater data would be needed to fully justify adoption of groundwater charges for these other areas.
5. How do I know if my well is recommended to be included in a groundwater benefit zone and what the potential impacts would be in my location?

Our Groundwater Benefit Zone Web App allows you to search your address, State Well number (e.g., 06S02W22G005), or Assessor’s Parcel Number. This app provides information on existing and recommended zones, as well as preliminary rate estimates: https://gis.valleywater.org/ZoB/. In January 2020, this app was updated to reflect the zones recommended by Valley Water staff.

6. When will the proposed zone changes take effect?

The proposed changes would only become effective if approved by Valley Water’s Board of Directors. Staff plans to recommend changes to the Board in spring of 2020. If changes are adopted, groundwater rates for the new zones would not be effective until July 2020 or later.

7. I use a well for my water supply but am not currently in a groundwater benefit zone. If the proposed changes are approved and my well is added to a zone, how much will it cost me?

The cost to individual Well Users will vary depending on which zone they are in since each zone benefits from a different group of Valley Water activities. The cost will also depend on how much groundwater is pumped and the final rate adopted by the Valley Water Board of Directors. Average domestic groundwater use is 2,500 cubic feet per month, or 0.7 acre-feet per year. If you pump that amount, we estimate your groundwater charge assessed by Valley Water would be:

- $85 per month if your well is in North County (north of the Coyote Valley).
- $19 to $30 per month if your well is in South County (Coyote Valley south to Gilroy).

8. If my well is already in a groundwater benefit zone, will my groundwater charges change?

If the recommended zone changes are approved, your groundwater charge would depend on location. Based on average domestic use (2,500 cubic feet/month), we estimate the charges would:

- Increase by about $1 per month if your well is in North County or Coyote Valley.
- Decrease by about $3 per month if your well is in the valley floor in the Morgan Hill/San Martin/Gilroy area.
- Decrease by about $10 per month for wells located in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains, below Uvas and Chesbro reservoirs and above the flat valley floor.

9. If Valley Water removes my well from a groundwater benefit zone, will I receive a refund? Why have I been paying if I receive no benefit?

The existing groundwater benefit zones (W-2 and W-5) were established based on the best available information in the 1960s and 1970s. Valley Water determined at that time that your area was benefitting from our activities. Our activities have changed over the last 40 years, and we know more about the groundwater basins. We now have decades of additional data to update the zones to ensure they fairly and equitably reflect benefits received.

The charges collected relate to the groundwater benefit zones adopted by the Board and remain in effect until the Board adopts changes. Staff will recommend to the Board that Valley Water neither make refunds to those that are removed from a groundwater benefit zone, nor seek payment for past pumping from those that are added to a zone.

10. Where can I find more information?

Please visit our study website at www.valleywater.org/gwbenefits. Project manager George Cook can also be reached via email at gcook@valleywater.org or by phone at (408) 630-2964.