

Underground movement to bank El Niño's rainfall

By Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times

Gary Serrato watched as a tractor worked its way across a field of dried-up weeds, slicing the sandy dirt into orderly furrows.

The field was being readied not for a crop but for what he hopes will be a bountiful harvest of floodwater this El Niño winter. "We're going to capture as much as we can," said Serrato, general manager of the Fresno Irrigation District.

He was standing in the district's Boswell Groundwater Banking Facility near Fresno: A complex of 100 graded acres enclosed by low earthen berms. If El Niño lives up to its promise, early next year up to 10 feet of Kings River flood flows will inundate the shallow basins and slowly seep into the torn earth, replenishing growers' groundwater supplies.

With El Nino promising a wet winter, water districts across the state are working feverishly to capture as much rain as possible to recharge depleted aquifers.

A confluence of factors is focusing attention on stowing supplies underground, which is generally cheaper and less environmentally damaging than building a big dam and reservoir.

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