

2026-2027 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY



FORD CITY – TAFT HEIGHTS SANITATION DISTRICT

Efficiently Managing Wastewater

**Release Date
October 26, 2026**

FORD CITY – TAFT HEIGHTS SANITATION DISTRICT

Efficiently Managing Wastewater

SUMMARY:

On June 21, 1976, the Ford City-Taft Heights Sanitation District (District) was formed. In 2015, the District successfully partnered with the City of Taft (City) in a mutually owned wastewater treatment plant (WWTP). Co-owned by the City and County of Kern (County) under the oversight of the Kern Sanitation Authority and Taft City Public Works, the WWTP is the picture of efficiency, serving residents of both the District and the City.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

California Penal Code §933.5, authorizes the 2026-2027 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to examine procedures and budgets of all special districts in Kern County. The Grand Jury investigated the Ford City-Taft Heights Sanitation District to determine if it is operating efficiently and in accordance with relevant laws, codes and ordinances.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury conducted interviews with the management of the Kern Sanitation Authority, the management of the Taft Public Works Department, a representative at the California State Water Resources Control Board, and a member of the Kern County Board of Supervisors. The Grand Jury visited the wastewater treatment plant, reviewed documents and ordinances related to the WWTP, and conducted internet research.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

Ford City originated as an oil boom town located north of Taft. It was named after the abundance of Ford Model T cars in town in the 1920s. Taft Heights is located southwest of Taft and was originally called Boust City in honor of the oilman, E. J. Boust, who founded the town. It was renamed Taft Heights in the 1950s.

The District is a dependent district governed by the Kern County Board of Supervisors. In June 2015, the City of Taft and the Kern Sanitation Authority entered into an agreement for the operation of the wastewater treatment facility. The City owns 52% of the wastewater treatment plant and Kern County owns 48%. Both entities share the financial responsibility of the WWTP. Further, the City contracts with the County for the City's share of the operation of the WWTP. This is currently performed by the Kern County Public Works Department.

Both the City and the District follow California Proposition 218, which limits the government authority to impose taxes for property-related fees without voter consent. These fees are collected via property taxes and new construction connection fees. Currently, the annual charge for sewer service to a single-family residence in the District is \$545.25, which is comparable to rates in the City of Taft. After experiencing breaches in the sewer system, which could have resulted in multi-million-dollar fines from the State of California, safeguards including flow meters were installed.



Flow meter to detect a breach in the sewer system
Picture from Smartcoversystems.com

The capacity for the WWTP is approximately 1.4 million gallons of wastewater per day. The WWTP currently processes approximately 800,000 gallons per day; this allows for substantial growth potential. The incoming wastewater is screened for non-biodegradable debris which is removed by an auger system. Augers are spiral-shaft devices that compact and convey solids from screening or grinding units for disposal. This helps plants run more efficiently and with less downtime.



Auger located at wastewater treatment plant
Picture taken by Grand Jury

After processing, the effluent (liquid waste) is discharged to 135 acres of an alfalfa field adjacent to the plant, which provides a small return (approximately \$10,000 annually) to the WWTP. The alfalfa field is owned by the City of Taft and contracted to a farmer. The residual sludge is processed into dry solid waste and is trucked to a fertilizer plant at a cost to the WWTP. The sludge removal process was improved upon by the current operator saving the WWTP approximately \$100,000 per year. Approximately eight years ago, the WWTP was upgraded with a \$3.6 million USDA Rural Development Loan, which was a considerable savings from the \$35 million estimate to rebuild the entire facility.

The sewer collection system for the WWTP is gravity fed, except for two lift (pump) stations; one in the City and one in the District. The operational condition of the stations is monitored regularly. There are back-up plans for any power outages. Areas below the WWTP elevation flow into a sump and when the sump reaches a certain capacity the sewage is lifted to the gravity main line.

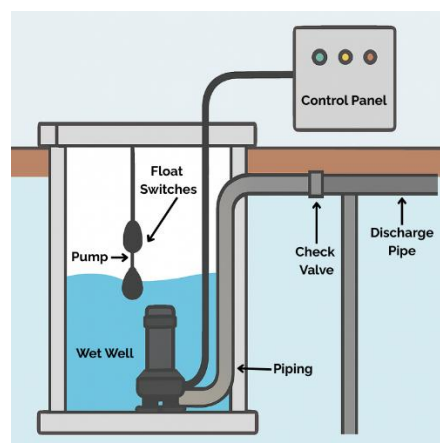


Diagram of lift station for wastewater sewage
Diagram from Clrbu.com

In September 2011, the City of Taft entered into a contract with a solar company to install a solar facility, which sells all power produced to the City. Management has expressed this contract is ambiguous and confusing as to any financial benefit to the WWTP. The contract will expire in 2031.

The District received \$6.6 million from the Federal American Recovery Act, which was spent on sewer line replacement within the District. Although the work was completed in 2026, the Bureau of Land Management must sign off on the project. At that time, the Notice of Completion will be filed.

FINDINGS:

- F1. The 2026-2027 Kern County Grand Jury finds the current solar contract with the City of Taft is not beneficial to the WWTP.

- F2. The 2026-2027 Kern County Grand Jury finds the 135 acres of alfalfa currently owned by the City of Taft is adequately handling the 800,000 gallons a day discharge from the WWTP. If the discharge exceeds the State permitted 1.5 million gallons a day, extensive improvements must be made to the WWTP to bring the effluent into compliance per the California State Water Resources Control Board. This could permit the possible discharge into Sandy Creek.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The 2026-2027 Kern County Grand Jury recommends:

- R1. By January 1, 2028, the Ford City-Taft Heights Sanitation District and the City of Taft should consider advantageous solar options to power the wastewater treatment plant, since the current solar contract will expire in 2031. (Finding F1)
- R2. By January 1, 2028, the Ford City-Taft Heights Sanitation District and the City of Taft should formulate a contingency plan to allow discharge of effluent into Sandy Creek, or alternative options. (Finding F2)

COMMENTS:

The 2026-2027 Kern County Grand Jury would like to thank the management of the Taft Public Works Department, the Kern Sanitation Authority, and the California State Water Resources Control Board for their valuable information and cooperation.

NOTES:

- The Kern County Board of Supervisors and the City of Taft should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.
- People wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: www.kerncounty.com/grandjury
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website: www.kerncounty.com/grandjury

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM:**

The Kern County Board of Supervisors

The City of Taft

**RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO PENAL CODE §§933(c)
AND 933.05 TO:**

- **PRESIDING JUDGE
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF KERN
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREMAN
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.