

Water Lines

Issue 1 - All About SGMA

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In 2014, after 2 years of severe drought—the worst since American populations came to dominate the state—California’s legislature passed the “Sustainable Groundwater Management Act” (SGMA). We look at what it replaces and how it’s supposed to work.

CA GW Management — Background

No Federal laws regulate groundwater and each state addresses it differently.

California gives regulation of groundwater withdrawals to local authorities, but only 28 of the 58 counties, plus municipal water suppliers, regulate wells.

Sonoma County well permit applications for agricultural and most residential wells get little review and no testing or reporting on pumping impacts is required, except in defined water-scarce areas.

Until 2014, California had no law for managing groundwater resources. Before 1992, state laws governing groundwater rights were based on loosely-defined doctrines, variously interpreted by courts over the

years. Clashes over water rights led to lengthy and expensive adjudications.

The California Groundwater Management Act (AB3030) passed in 1992, provided a voluntary, but official, process for local agencies to establish groundwater management panels, representing all stakeholders in a basin. The panels were intended to formulate consensus-based groundwater management plans.

Other laws provided state funding opportunities for projects to gather data and for scientific studies.

Short dry spells in 2004 and 2007 led California to set up a mandatory California State Groundwater Elevation Mon-

itoring (CASGEM) program for gathering and storing well-water level data for state, federal and public scrutiny.

In 2007, the Sonoma County Water Agency began to develop groundwater management plans under AB3030 for Sonoma Valley and the Santa Rosa Plain, based on U.S. Geological Survey studies. A panel for Petaluma Valley was planned, and USGS studies are currently underway.

In 2013, severe drought hit the state, and particularly the Central Valley, leading to passage of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), which requires formation of Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) for all three Sonoma County GW basins.

What is Groundwater? (Legally, that is ...)

California law defines water present in subsurface soil, either percolating downward, or present in confined or unconfined aquifers, as groundwater. Unfortunately, State law treats surface water as if it is quite separate from groundwater. Many state’s laws, including California’s, invent a type of groundwater: “subterranean streams flowing through known and definite channels.” This works in many states, but such channels are more difficult to define in California.



SGMA (*pronounce it SiGMA*) Simplified

*SWiG:
Clean Water
Information
for Public
Consumption*

SWiG is a project of the O.W.L (Open space, Water resources, and Land use) Foundation, a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization.

All donations are fully tax-deductible

Well water levels are on the Web!

GW Monitoring Project:
<http://www.owlfoundation.net/>

About SWiG ...

SWiG is a non-profit community organization located in Sebastopol, CA. Both Sebastopol and surrounding rural areas rely solely on groundwater pumped from public and private wells.

SWiG: Gathers and analyzes groundwater supply and water quality information
Advocates for sustainable local and countywide surface and groundwater management, and has represented well owners on the Santa Rosa Plain Groundwater Management Plan Panel since 2010.
Performs well monitoring for Sebastopol well-owners
Organizes forums on water concerns, and oversees peer review processes for collaboratively-funded studies
Interacts with local landowners, City Councils, County and State water agencies, and Science-research organizations.

SWiG is a cofounding member of the Sonoma County Water Coalition

In September 2014, Governor Brown signed historic legislation requiring that California's critical groundwater resources be sustainably managed by local agencies.

The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) requires formation of new local agencies, called Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs), for managing groundwater, and requires them to develop Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs) for medium- and high-priority groundwater basins.

In Sonoma County, three of the county's 14 basins and sub-basins are currently designated as medium-priority: Santa Rosa Plain, Sonoma Valley and Petaluma Valley. No basins are currently designated as high priority. SGMA does not apply to groundwater sources outside of mapped groundwater basins.

SGMA defines sustainable management as managing and using groundwater in a way that can be sustained over a long period of time.

Sustainable yield is defined as the amount of

groundwater that can be withdrawn annually without chronically lowering groundwater levels, causing seawater intrusion, degrading water quality, causing land subsidence or depleting interconnected surface water (for example, creeks, streams and rivers) in a manner that causes significant and adverse impacts.

SGMA provides local governments and stakeholders limited time to form GSAs (by June 30, 2017). But completion of GSPs for critically overdrafted basins is not required until January 31, 2020.

All other basins need not complete GSPs until January of 2022

Some of Sonoma County's principal groundwater basins have issues, such as saltwater intrusion in southern Sonoma Valley and the Petaluma basin, but none is in critical overdraft—but USGS did identify an average annual deficit in the Santa Rosa Plain basin, over the past 35 years.

Sonoma County decided to form one GSA for each of the basins; the three will share staff and coordinate funding requests.

The County also appointed a special working group to consider what form the GSAs should take. The working group has proposed a Joint Powers Committee structure for the governing board, supported by an Advisory Committee (AC).

The proposed GSA for Santa Rosa Plain would consist of delegates from each of the 6 cities plus the County Board of Supervisors, the Sonoma County Water Agency, and the Sonoma Resource Conservation District Board, and one representative of PUC-regulated and other private groundwater-dependent mutual water supply companies.

The AC would include a representative from these same entities, plus 9 "interest-based members," including environmental and rural well-owners, and Goldridge RCD.