

# The Paso water district is dead. Now how about something that can work?

Hybrid “compromise” doomed water district from the start

Best solution: Allow State Water Resources Control Board to manage groundwater basin

State should require largest water users to install meters and reduce water consumption



Paso Robles voters rejected proposed measures to form a Paso Robles groundwater management district in an election Tuesday. The proposed district would have been managed by a hybrid board of citizens and landowners. David Middlecampmiddlecamp@thetribunenews.com

By Andrew Christie and Susan Harvey

If you wanted to pinpoint the moment when the fate of the [failed Paso Robles groundwater management district](#) was foretold, you could go back five decades, when the Supreme Court affirmed the fundamental principle of “one person, one vote.”

Or you could just go back to the Feb. 18, 2014, meeting of the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors. At that meeting, the chief consultant to [Assemblyman Katcho Achadjian's](#) Local Government Committee described the facts of life when it comes to legislation authorizing the formation

of special water districts:

“The general trend over the last hundred years I would say ... is to move away from landowner-based districts and voting ... and toward resident voting, or one person per parcel, one person per vote.”

You could also say the doom of the proposed landowner-based district was sealed the year before by the forced compromise that created its Rube Goldberg structure but was unable to obscure the essential fact of its design: Elections to fill the majority of seats on the board would forever be decided based on the amount of acres owned by voters. District board members with a financial stake in irrigated agriculture would rule the basin and dominate all decisions regarding the disposition of its water in perpetuity; those not thus involved would be consigned to a perpetual minority. This was deemed “local control.”

## ADVERTISING

The “compromise” that began the long, strange trip of the “hybrid” water district at the end of 2013 was simply a capitulation, with one side of the fight conceding to the basin’s agricultural interests on their primary demand: acreage-based control over any water district that would be created.

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For that reason alone it should have proceeded no further. Instead, over the next two years, legislation was drafted, received the blessing of the Board of Supervisors and went to Sacramento, where, in its first committee hearing, it garnered 150 letters in opposition versus 10 in support.

Again, the writing was on the wall, but the [bill authorizing creation of the hybrid district](#) was rammed through, over the objections of North County Watch, Sierra Club California, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, the Planning and Conservation League, California Teamsters Public Affairs Council, Defenders of Wildlife, Center for Biological Diversity, Clean Water Action, Food and Water Watch, Southern California Watershed Alliance, California Coastal Protection Network, and Community Water Impact Network. We advocated instead for a district “where residents are treated equally regardless of the amount of lands owned.”

Finally, the most elaborate and confusing [ballots](#) in the county’s history were mailed out to myriad classifications of voters. Corporate ag interests, outspending district opponents by more than 5-to-1, rolled out big money to persuade residents that an acreage-based water district was a great idea. Thanks to the voters — ironically engaging in the democratic process that the proposed district sought to evade by its design — the long and winding road finally reached its predictable end.

Now that this hopelessly compromised and convoluted exercise is over, here’s the best thing that could happen next: The State Water Resources Control Board steps in to implement the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act and immediately requires (A) well metering and reporting of usage over the basin by the 12 percent of the basin’s water users who use 90 percent of the water, and (B) cutbacks

from those users between 5 percent and 15 percent. If that happens, the basin will quickly start seeing signs of recovery, which will be felt first by rural residents who have been watching their well levels fall.

Then we could have a discussion about why that took so long.

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