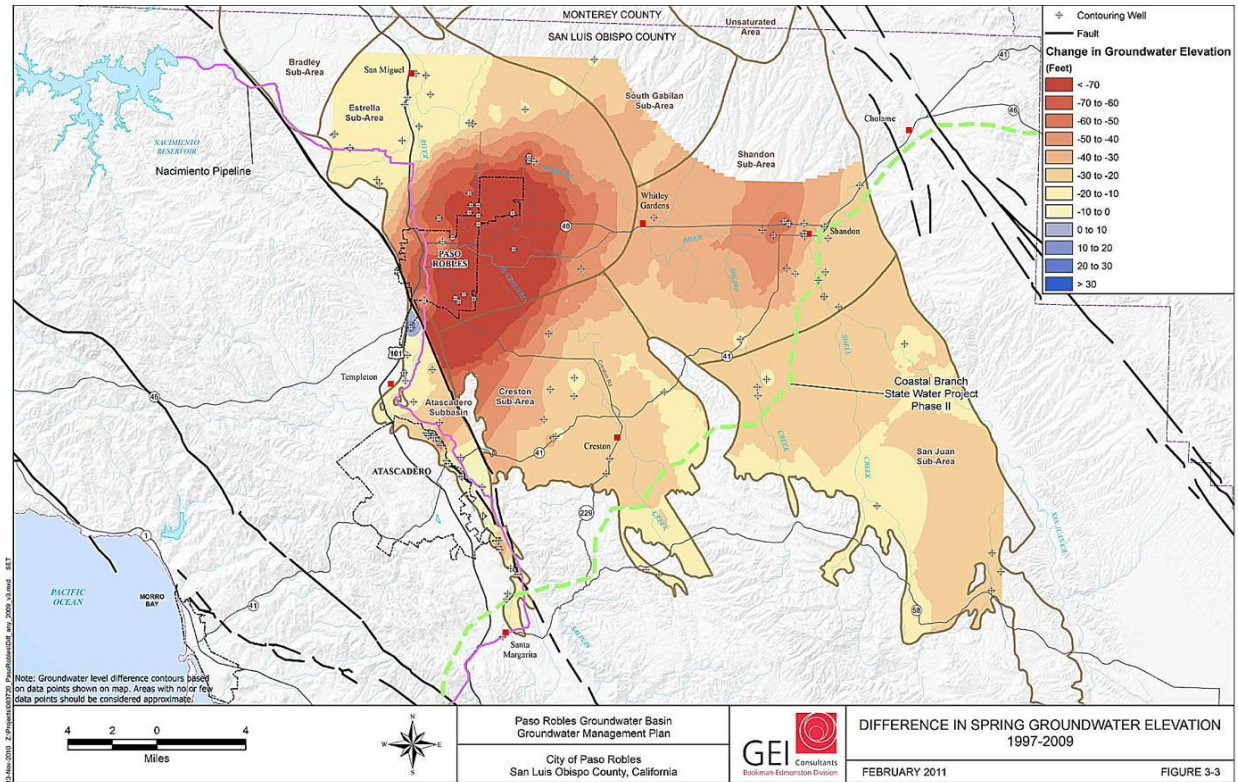


# The Jury is In

## The plan to save the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin is failing



In 2014, the California legislature passed the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), requiring local communities to form Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs) to be administered by Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs).

On June 23, the SLO County Grand Jury [released its report](#) on the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin. It's a stark accounting of the failure of the Paso Basin Groundwater Sustainability Plan and Groundwater Sustainability Agencies. The Grand Jury found that “without faster progress toward a sustainable basin, more rural resident wells will continue to go dry and water quality could deteriorate.”

For over five years, the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club and North County Watch have submitted comments to the California Department of Water Resources, the County and other decision makers that have said pretty much the same things the Grand Jury report says.

The various GSA's responsible for governance of the basin and the development and implementation of a Groundwater Sustainability Plan meet under the umbrella of the Paso Basin Cooperative Committee (PBCC). The report notes that the PBCC has held a lot of meetings since its formation in 2017, but, as the Grand Jury delicately put it, “although continued outreach and

engagement of stakeholders is necessary and ongoing, the PBCC will need to take immediate action.”

The main body of the report is 28 pages long, so we will just hit the highlights from the summary of findings and recommendations:

The Paso Basin is in decline and the water deficit continues as noted in the GSP and Annual Reports.

The well monitoring network (water levels) data set is incomplete and does not provide information from some key areas.

The dataset on agricultural user pumping volumes (extractions) is incomplete.

Neither feasible supplemental water options nor conservation measures can balance the basin.

The combination of drought conditions and increased agricultural lands in production has resulted in an unsustainable decline in the Paso Basin.

Since 1998 there has been a reduction of over 700,000 acre feet of groundwater storage, resulting in dry wells for many rural residential properties and jeopardizing long-term agricultural viability.

The current number and location of groundwater monitoring well data collected by the PBCC is insufficient for decision making.

The PBCC currently does not require or have full access to the annual volume of groundwater pumping by all agricultural users to determine the extent of the demand on the basin.

The GSP initiatives for feasible supplemental water options and conservation measures are insufficient to balance the basin. Basin recovery depends upon reduction in active agricultural production pumping.

The failure of the PBCC to apply equitable pumping restrictions has resulted in continued decline of the Paso Basin.

Public information and outreach on Paso Basin status is inadequate.

Fees that would make the GSP self-sustaining are not uniformly applied across the GSAs.

Rural residential wells remain at risk. Many rural residential users lack the resources and means to correct the situation.

Management efforts have not advanced sufficiently to begin regulation of basin activities.

The GSAs need to expedite their plans to expand the monitoring network for use in the 2025 GSP update.

The GSAs need to employ the most accurate satellite data for determining groundwater utilization or adopt regulations which mandate reporting of groundwater extraction for agricultural production wells within the Paso Basin by the 2025 GSP update.

Voluntary land fallowing needs to be initiated by the 2025 GSP update. If voluntary measures are ineffective, the PBCC will need to implement a mandatory program.

The GSAs must establish and implement the necessary governance structure to build public trust and execute procedures up to and including formal regulations to define equitable groundwater extractions and enforcement mechanisms.

## It's not just Paso

By coincidence, at almost the same moment as the release of the SLO Grand Jury report, the Groundwater Leadership Forum released its report on its review of every Groundwater Sustainability Plan approved by the state. The deteriorating situation the County Grand Jury found in the Paso Basin can be found statewide, as telegraphed by the title of their report, ["Achieving Groundwater Access for All - Why Groundwater Sustainability Plans are Failing Many Users."](#)

The Forum reviewed over 19,000 pages of data and found that GSPs are generally failing to achieve the goals of California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

On August 22, the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors responded, agreeing to implement the report's recommendations for developing a plan to set aside funds to develop an administrative mechanism to ensure that rural residential users have access to water and to implement fees to fund projects for basin sustainability. No timeframe was set.

Responses from the Paso Basin Cooperative Committee and the Shandon – San Juan Water District are due by September 22.

We have alerted the offices of Representatives Jimmy Panetta and Salud Carbajal.

**DECLINING PASO GROUNDWATER BASIN**  
**Vineyard and ag interests push special water district**

Crowd in Paso is urged to protest water-pumping or land-use ordinances

By JULIE LYNEM  
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The way to replenish the Paso Robles groundwater basin is not to impose restrictions on the agricultural community, but to push for a California Water District that would have the power to establish short-term and long-term solutions to stabilize the aquifer.

That's the message from the Paso Robles Agriculture Alliance for Groundwater Solutions, a group of vineyard owners and other agriculturalists who want to establish a special district that could obtain loans to help people dig deeper wells, as well as fund projects to get supplemental water.

The association, also

Former Cuesta, Poly star to help replace suspended former MVP

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Attendees stand in the doorway of the Paso Robles Inn Grand Ballroom during the Paso Robles Agriculture Alliance for Groundwater Solutions community meeting Monday.

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY JOE JOHNSTON

**The more things change, the more they stay the same** Back in 2013, North County ag interests had a plan for the groundwater basin: "[O]btain loans to help people dig deeper wells, as well as fund projects to get supplemental water." A reduction in agricultural production pumping... not so much. That approach didn't work then, and it's not working now.