

Sierra Club California
RESTORING OUR AQUIFERS

Groundwater is a vital part of California's water supply, but its users, both farmers and water agencies, have misused it for generations. Aquifers, the underground layers of sand and gravel where groundwater is naturally stored, have become depleted through over pumping. Some are actually collapsing, causing both land subsidence and permanent loss of storage capacity.

To its credit, the State Legislature has responded with the Sustainable Ground Water Management Act (SGMA) which requires that our groundwater resources be sustainably managed. Sierra Club California wholehearted supports the goals of the SGMA. Because decisions made in this early phase of the SGMA will have long-term consequences, it is vital that the California Department of Water Resources, local agencies, and the State Legislature make decisions that will have a positive impact on vulnerable communities, ecosystems, and water resources.

Improving SGMA

SGMA doesn't require even the most stressed basins to be covered by a Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP) until 2020. Because of this, interim legislation is needed to prevent permanent damage to these groundwater basins and the communities that rely on them.

- Without any pumping limits, farms continue to plant acres of new tree crops that rely on groundwater from over-drafted basins. Over pumping groundwater to support these new permanent crops causes decreased stream flows, saltwater intrusion, land subsidence, dry wells in disadvantaged communities, and permanent damage to the storage capacity of the basins.
- Sierra Club California supports legislation that prohibits drilling new wells in critically overdrafted groundwater basins, and requires permits for new wells in high and medium priority basins by July 1, 2018.

Making GSAs Work

The SGMA requires that Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSA) be formed by June 2017 to develop and implement sustainability plans for high

and medium priority groundwater basins. The composition and integrity of these GSAs will be critical to achieving the goals of the SGMA.

- The interests of residential water users, disadvantaged communities, and the environment must be represented in the Groundwater Sustainability Agencies.
- Agricultural water districts like Westlands, whose boards are elected by large landowners, should not be allowed to be the only interests represented on GSA boards controlling groundwater basins.
- The best way to ensure that the interests of the environment and the public are represented in the new GSAs is for the state to require that officials directly elected by the public, such as city councils or county boards of supervisors, be included in all GSAs.
- DWR should encourage all GSAs to create advisory committees composed of local residential well users and representatives of local environmental and other interest groups to help formulate the GSAs' sustainability plans.

Replenishing and Protecting Aquifers

Replenishing California's groundwater basins is necessary, but could harm critical ecosystems and urban water consumers if the sources of water used for replenishment are not carefully selected.

A system of prioritization should be applied to determine where to obtain water for replenishment:

- Top priority should be given to using recycled water and water made available by fallowing unproductive land.
- Second priority should be given to using local surface water.
- The lowest priority should be assigned to using surface water removed from streams and rivers flowing into the San Francisco Bay Delta.

Also, to prevent further damage to groundwater basins that are used for drinking water or agriculture, California must also pass legislation banning the introduction of industrial wastewater, like waste water from oil and gas operations, into our aquifers that serve as a source of drinking water or other

beneficial use.

Taking Sustainability Plans Seriously

DWR and the State Water Resources Control Board must have the necessary staffing and resources to successfully evaluate GSPs, monitor compliance with their provisions, and intervene if GSA's are failing to adequately protect groundwater resources. This effort is of paramount urgency and benefit to the entire state.