

# If Paso Fails

## Sept. 19 will trigger judgment day for the Paso groundwater basin’s “incomplete” sustainability plan

On January 21, the Department of Water Resources (DWR) released “Incomplete” determinations on four Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs) developed by local agencies to meet the requirements of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. The deficient groundwater agencies were given 180 days to address the deficiencies and resubmit their revised GSPs to the Department for review.

All incomplete GSPs were revised and submitted to the DWR by July 27 and posted on the [SGMA Portal](#). Sept. 19 is the last day for the public to submit comments on those incomplete plans. Sometime after that, the state will render judgment.

The Paso Robles Groundwater Basin, as should surprise no one who has followed the tortured history of attempts to manage it, was on the DWR’s naughty list. (If you didn’t read [“Paso Basin Still Wishing and Hoping”](#) in the Jul./Aug. *Santa Lucian*, go ahead and read that and come back.)

For several years during the County’s first failed effort to form a groundwater agency, we pointed out the essential conundrum behind the ongoing failure to manage the basin. Rather than make you hunt up, say, [our April 2013 issue](#), here’s the gist: The big growers and pumpers are constitutionally incapable of effectively addressing the biggest threat to the sustainability of the basin, i.e. themselves.

The problems with democracy that plagued those formative years now appear likely to come back to bite.

But if the DWR should find that our local groundwater agency failed on their second chance to fix the fundamental problem – i.e. their proposal to achieve a sustainable level of groundwater in the basin will not have that result – and now it’s time for the state to fix it for them, a major

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**SANTA LUCIAN**

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### Paso's Last Drop

Big Grape is plunging North County into overdraft as a steering committee dithers and residents and small wineries circle the drain

Paso Robles has gained international fame as a wine region known for its outstanding reds – Cabernet, Pinot and Merlot. The warm days and cool evening breezes yield wine grapes of outstanding quality. Paso's success has hidden from view a looming disaster. DWR facts are downplayed. Anyone who discusses the issue in public forums is admonished.

The groundwater basin that sustains the majority of this wine grape growing region is in serious jeopardy. Groundwater levels have been declining in portions of the basin for decades. Over the past fifteen years, while wine grape acreage dramatically increased, the majority of the groundwater basin went into severe decline.

quality, family-owned wineries, the largest vineyards are now owned by real estate investment firms, multi-national corporations, and out-of-town billionaires.

The region's top twenty wine grape growers use 40% of the water in the water basin. The largest vineyard owners in the Paso Robles area include:

- Stewart and Lynda Rasmick, the new owners of Justin Winery, currently planting 600+ acres of wine grapes. In the process, the new owners of Justin have removed numerous native oak trees and started construction of numerous ponds for dust protection and irrigation management. The Rasmicks are best known for Fiji Water, PINK Wanderer, Teleford, Paramount Farming (the world's largest producer of mushrooms)

environmental injustice is in the offing: If the state steps in to manage the basin, everyone residing over the basin will be charged a management fee of \$300 per well.

Residential use accounts for about 4% of the water pumped from the aquifer annually. Commercial agriculture pumps the rest. This is a wildly disproportionate allocation of the costs between the 4% domestic users and the Ag pumpers. One group of users is using their wells for drinking, bathing, and other household needs; the other group is using their wells to secure millions of dollars in profits. When a fee for one is a crushing burden, and for the other is a cost-of-doing-business, that's a regressive tax – particularly egregious considering the dominance on the Groundwater Sustainability Agencies by commercial ag, which, in freezing out residential users, inevitably brought forth a non-compliant “Incomplete” Groundwater Sustainability Plan.