

County vs. Water

The relationship between San Luis Obispo County's government and water or the lack thereof [continues to be fraught](#).

Back in 2015, SLO County was pushing forward with its conception of a Paso Robles Groundwater Management District that would have ensured the control of one of California's major aquifers in perpetuity by the largest landowners and biggest pumpers in the region. A dozen local, state, and national organizations (including this one) urged crucial amendments, as we saw serious problems with this plan. Our county supervisors and newspaper of record did not, and in 2016, it went down to overwhelming defeat at the polls.



Back in the day SLO County tried to create a water district that would "obtain loans to help people dig deeper wells" instead of establish sustainable management criteria for groundwater. The state of California begs to differ.

Five years later, the county appears to have teed up its second strike.

The City of Paso Robles Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA), Paso Basin/County of San Luis Obispo GSA, San Miguel Community Services District GSA, and the Shandon/San Juan GSA have submitted the Salinas Valley Groundwater Basin/Paso Robles Area Subbasin Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP) to the Department of Water Resources for evaluation, as required by California's Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

It's not going well.

On June 3, the state informed the SLO County Department of Public Works that it has detected deficiencies in the plan.

Specifically: "Department staff are concerned that although the GSP appears to realistically quantify the water budget and identify the extent of overdraft in the Subbasin, and while the GSP

proposes projects and management actions that appear likely to eventually eliminate overdraft in the Subbasin, the GSP has not defined sustainable management criteria.”

Apparently, “the GSP’s lack of explanation and justification for selecting sustainable management criteria for groundwater levels, particularly the minimum thresholds and undesirable results, and the effects of those criteria on the interests of beneficial uses and users of groundwater,” is a problem.

Also: “The GSAs do not sufficiently demonstrate that interconnected surface water or undesirable results related to depletions of interconnected surface water are not present and are not likely to occur in the Subbasin.”

And, in claiming there is no data to show such a connection, the plan is in conflict with studies, groundwater modeling and water budgets actually cited in the plan, which would “appear to clearly indicate that interconnectivity between groundwater and surface water exists... primarily on the Salinas River and Estrella River that overlay the Alluvial Aquifer.” Despite this, and the fact that “users of domestic wells, agricultural wells, municipal water supply, and community water supply report being negatively impacted by reduced stream flows... the GSAs do not develop sustainable management criteria for depletions of interconnected surface water.”

In short: “the sustainable management criteria currently presented in the GSP... is not commensurate with the level of understanding of the basin setting.”

And even more pointedly: “Other GSAs and interested parties in California have evaluated the effects of sustainable management criteria on well infrastructure using best available information.”

At one point, the Dept. of Water Resources points out that “not developing criteria limits the ability of Department staff to assess whether the Subbasin is being, or will be, sustainability managed within 20 years.”

Yes, that is what that does. But it doesn’t seem to occur to the state regulators that for some folks around these parts, that’s not a bug, it’s a feature. The DWR is getting a hands-on introduction to the mindset and political philosophy that reigned over the Board of Supervisors meetings on the Paso Groundwater Basin circa 2013-2016. At each of those hearings, and all the op eds in between, the opponents of conservation never failed to call for more studies – more and more, stretching over the horizon – which would, of course, preclude any action, or alteration in the status quo, or a potential financial inconvenience to major users until those studies were complete and perfect knowledge was gained. We wouldn’t know for certain if the Paso Basin was in serious trouble until the last well ran dry. Then, armed with definitive knowledge, we could spring into action.

Five years later, it is not a great surprise that the Groundwater Sustainability Plan that evolved from those beginnings has generally “not defined sustainable management criteria” and displays a remarkable “lack of explanation and justification for selecting sustainable management criteria for groundwater levels.”

That party's over, says California, because here's the thing about studies:

“Department staff understand that uncertainty may exist in understanding the basin setting and recognize efforts by the GSAs to fill data gaps by planning to conduct investigations and expand the monitoring network. The information and science included in the GSP related to interconnected surface water represents, at this time, the best available to the GSAs even if the available data may be imperfect or the analysis incomplete. Therefore, Department staff believe there is sufficient data to indicate the potential of interconnected surface water in the Subbasin that warrants and requires setting initial sustainable management criteria that may be reevaluated and potentially modified as new data become available.”

After eight pages of painfully detailed deficiencies, DWR's response ends with this blunt command:

“Evaluate and disclose, sufficiently and thoroughly, the potential effects of the GSP's sustainable management criteria for depletion of interconnected surface water on beneficial uses of the interconnected surface water and on groundwater uses and users.”

If our local groundwater managers don't correct the listed deficiencies, the state may deem their plan incomplete -- a determination with a deadline of January 31, 2022, but which the Dept. of Water Resources may make at any time. After that determination, the GSAs will have 180 days to submit an acceptable Groundwater Sustainability Plan. If such is not forthcoming, the state can displace the GSA's and take over management of the basin.