

PPIC

How Water Justice Groups View Groundwater Sustainability Planning

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Over-pumping of groundwater has caused domestic wells to go dry in the San Joaquin Valley. Yet many of the first round of plans prepared to comply with the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) do not yet propose ways to address this problem. We explored groundwater planning with three members of the environmental justice community—Angela Islas of Self-Help Enterprises, Justine Massey of the Community Water Center, and Amanda Monaco of the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability.



PPIC: From the perspective of the communities you represent, how do you think groundwater planning is going?

AMANDA MONACO: SGMA says that groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) are responsible for protecting water for all groundwater users—and specifically names domestic well users and disadvantaged communities. For decades there's been all this energy around creating a huge agricultural industry in the San Joaquin Valley, and while it's important to grow food, we've ended up in a situation that is unsustainable given the bounds of water supply and other natural resources. Thousands of families have gone months without water in the valley. We urgently need to respond to this problem.

ANGELA ISLAS: What we have seen is that agricultural interests are very dominant on SGMA committees and GSA boards. There hasn't been much discussion on how to make these groups more inclusive to voices of disadvantaged communities. We've done a lot of outreach to help communities using small water systems and domestic wells join these meetings. But many times their input isn't implemented in the plans. Many residents have huge barriers to participation, even before the pandemic. Things like meeting location, lack of transportation, and technical language being used can make it hard for them to engage. These things need to be worked out, and GSAs need to bring drinking water users' input into the implementation process.

PPIC: Based on the first round of groundwater plans, what more is needed to protect vulnerable communities in the San Joaquin Valley?

JUSTINE MASSEY: Many of the plans will allow the drinking water crisis to escalate. Recent reports have found that current plans would result in many thousands of families losing access to drinking

water—as many as 127,000 more Californians could be affected. That’s not an acceptable measure of sustainability. The plans also fail to protect water quality from further contamination.

AM: We’re seeing criteria in some plans that could increase contamination and leave people without water in their wells and homes. The plans need better goals for water management to prevent this—or a clear indication of how they will address these issues. To protect domestic wells, we’d also like plans to have trigger points, so that a GSA isn’t waiting until the last minute to intervene if people’s drinking water is at risk. These trigger points might mean you cut back pumping in a particular area for a time.

Our Human Right to Water scorecard provides some standards for the state to evaluate plans. Our Well Mitigation Framework explains how agencies can protect drinking water by committing to digging deeper wells and designing effective monitoring networks, among other things. To make these plans work for vulnerable communities, we need better data on where domestic wells are and how deep they are. If plans allow groundwater levels to drop so low that drinking wells go dry, agencies should have a quick-response program to mitigate the problem. GSAs should also collaborate with other agencies to help local small systems consolidate into larger systems, which is usually the best long-term solution where feasible. All of these solutions should be guided by community expertise about what works best for them.

JM: We are at a crucial point in SGMA implementation. The state is reviewing these plans over the next two years, but in the meantime programs are being implemented and new plans are being drafted in other regions. DWR should reject plans that do not adequately protect water for domestic water users and disadvantaged communities.

PPIC: What are some ways to encourage cross-cutting solutions between SGMA and other programs seeking to ensure safe drinking water for all Californians?

JM: It’s very important that GSAs take seriously their role in the effort to protect water quality. Water quality is one of six groundwater impacts that they must address. GSAs should provide information about well locations and monitor water quality degradation in their area. From there, coordinating with other regulatory agencies is important, but GSAs need to get in the game first and show they’re part of these efforts. The director of the Department of Water Resources, Karla Nemeth, has emphasized that GSAs are responsible for preventing harm to drinking water users. Specifically, the SAFER program, which seeks to increase drinking water access, is not meant to fill in groundwater planning gaps that threaten safe water access.

AI: A big part of our work is to help communities understand all the complex programs that could impact their communities. We do the best we can to break down complex information, and facilitate communication with GSAs, and hopefully we get to the point where people can do this on their own. We also train interested residents and water board members. When communities feel more comfortable with this material it helps them go to a GSA or city hall meeting and get their voices heard.