

# CIVICWELL

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## CivicWell Recommends Solutions to Promote Regional Groundwater Sustainability

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Communities in Western states are facing a crisis around the continuing demand for an increasingly limited resource. California depends on groundwater for over 40 percent of its water supply—up to 60 percent in dry years. Growing impacts of climate change, including the increasingly severe drought-flood cycle, have combined with decades of over-pumping groundwater to create dire situations in communities throughout the state: domestic and shallow wells are going dry, and land is subsiding in parts of the Central Valley. In the City of Corcoran alone, land has subsided as much as 11.5 feet, causing acute flooding concerns.

Policymakers and community-based organizations have worked tirelessly to seek solutions to this seemingly intractable problem. In 2014 California passed the landmark Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA). The law was co-authored by CivicWell Policy Director Roger Dickinson, then a California State Assemblymember. SGMA directed the formation of regional Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) that would each create plans detailing their strategies for achieving groundwater sustainability.

In March 2023 the Department of Water Resources deemed six of those plans inadequate. Now, CivicWell has joined with a host of organizations in submitting comments and recommendations to the State Water Board on its interventions into these inadequate plans.

### **SGMA and Groundwater Sustainability**

SGMA was designed to protect California's critical groundwater resources. As part of this legislation, the regional GSAs were tasked with developing Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs) to achieve groundwater sustainability. The state did not adopt standard metrics to define groundwater sustainability, instead allowing the plans to be geared toward each GSA's self-defined sustainability goals along with avoiding six state-defined undesirable results:

- groundwater-level declines
- land subsidence
- seawater intrusion
- groundwater-storage reductions
- interconnected surface-water depletions
- water-quality degradation

According to a statement from the Department of Water Resources, the six plans deemed inadequate "did not appropriately address deficiencies" in how water suppliers aimed to limit overdraft, land subsidence and impacts to drinking water wells. Further, the GSAs "did not analyze and justify continued groundwater level declines and land subsidence."

"Since the onset of SGMA, local agencies have stepped up with dedication and progress in meeting critical milestones," said DWR Director Karla Nemeth. "Protecting domestic wells, minimizing land subsidence and protecting groundwater resources are all State priorities. Implementation of these plans, which will require difficult adjustments as we go, will ultimately provide a safe and reliable groundwater supply for communities for generations to come."

Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability policy coordinator Nataly Escobedo-Garcia shared with CalMatters that "most, if not all, of the approved and rejected plans allow groundwater levels to drop significantly before leveling off."

As noted in a 2022 report co-authored by CivicWell, Clean Water Action, and others, this is an issue that disproportionately impacts marginalized communities and small farms. When the water table drops, larger farms have the resources to dig deeper wells. The shallow wells, those typically belonging to small farms, run dry first. And even if they don't dry up, they sometimes become unusable due to groundwater pollution and fertilizer seepage.

The rejected plans include:

- Chowchilla Subbasin in Madera and Merced counties
- Delta-Mendota Subbasin in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Merced, Fresno, Madera, and San Benito counties
- Kaweah Subbasin in Tulare and Kings counties
- Tule Subbasin in Tulare County
- Tulare Lake Subbasin in Kings County
- Kern Subbasin in Kern County

## **Comments and Recommendations on Inadequate Groundwater Sustainability Plans**

Earlier this month CivicWell co-signed a letter to the State Water Control Resources Board sharing comments and recommendations regarding the Board's intervention in the out-of-compliance GSPs. We joined a diverse and broad-based group of organizations who also co-signed the letter, including Audubon California, Clean Water Action / Clean Water Fund, Community Water Center, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, The Nature Conservancy, Self-Help Enterprises, and Union of Concerned Scientists.

Our joint comments were based on review and analysis focused on how well drinking water users, disadvantaged communities, environmental criteria such as groundwater-dependent ecosystems, stakeholder engagement and inclusion, and climate change—especially if increasing impacts of climate change were incorporated into future water budgets—were addressed in GSPs. We looked in detail at the requirements laid out in SGMA and whether they were sufficiently addressed.

We include specific recommendations for state intervention, stakeholder engagement, additional areas for improvement in the inadequate GSPs, the timeline for remedying deficiencies, and ongoing monitoring for groundwater level and groundwater quality impacts to vulnerable communities and ecosystems.